Legends of Memphis Wrestling

Steve Crawford

Acknowledgments

The genesis for this project came from the "Memphis Wrestling Hall of Fame" that Brian Tramel originated for his (now defunct) *RasslinRiot* website. I asked Brian if I could write a book based upon the concept and he graciously allowed me to do so. However, I did make the editorial judgments on which performers to include.

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I have used a broad range of additional sources including Dave Meltzer's *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, Scott Teal's *Whatever Happened To…?*, as well as articles by wrestling journalists Greg Oliver, Steven Johnson, and Mike Mooneyham. I viewed a number of "shoot" interviews by the individuals involved with the Memphis promotion and books by Jerry Lawler, Jerry Jarrett, Jimmy Valiant, Jimmy Hart, and Dutch Mantell were helpful as well. Wrestling results, articles, and information from *Ask the Clawmaster* (Jim Zordani), the *Wrestling Classics Message Board*, and *Kayfabe Memories* websites were used to put some of the puzzle pieces together. Websites for *Championship Wrestling from Florida* and *Georgia Championship Wrestling* were invaluable for match results. I am also indebted to both Tim Dills and Sherman Willmont who have conducted substantive, insightful interviews with promoter Jerry Jarrett

This book is dedicated to Beth, Zachary, and Tori Crawford for putting up with my endless wrestling obsession. Those three people know better than anyone else in the world that Jim Cornette's Midnight Express was stronger…just a little bit longer.

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On

18 December, 1978, Jerry "The King" Lawler was seconds away from winning the coveted National Wrestling Alliance heavyweight championship belt, the biggest prize in the "sport" of wrestling. The cocky hometown hero, who drew thousands of fans to the Mid-South Coliseum on a weekly basis, was preparing to pile drive the rugged NWA champion, Harley Race. The pile driver maneuver was so dangerous it was "banned in the state of Tennessee," but could be "legally" used in this no disqualification contest. Whenever a pile driver was executed, not only was the match over, but the recipient was often "injured" from its devastating impact. However, just before the fatal blow was delivered to Race, an enraged "Handsome" Jimmy Valiant stormed into the ring. Valiant broke a Coke bottle over Lawler's head and then stabbed Lawler in the shoulder with the broken remains. Race was disqualified due to outside interference, but the title could not change hands on a

disqualification. The crowd had been moved from huge anticipation to shock to hatred in a matter of seconds. And so went another well

orchestrated and profitable night of mat mayhem in Memphis, Tennessee.

Introduction – All the Way from Memphis

"*What's known as the Memphis style is fire and action. You know, just wild street fights," Jerry Jarrett from the film "Memphis Heat."*

Nick Gulas was not a beloved man. History did not record how the Birmingham, Alabama native of Greek descent entered the secretive world of professional wrestling. Lou Thesz, who along with many other wrestlers had nothing but contempt for the promoter, wrote in his autobiography *Hooker* that Gulas was working as "the office gofer" in Birmingham when they first met. This introduction occurred in 1935 or 1936, as it happened during Thesz's first year as a touring wrestler. After learning the business from Birmingham promoter Joe Gunther, Gulas began promoting Nashville in 1937. Over the years, Nashville became the center of a large geographic wrestling territory that included Memphis, Chattanooga, Birmingham, and Huntsville. There was also a talent exchange agreement with the local promoter in Knoxville and the circuit included many small towns in Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi, and Arkansas.

Nick's business partner in the promotion was Roy Welch, a former grappler who had at one point toured the South wrestling a bear. Roy's three brothers, Jack, Herb, and Lester, were all wrestlers as well. In the theater of office politics, Roy played the folksy "good cop" role, while Nick was the "bad cop." Roy would demonstrate sincere concern about the complaints of the wrestlers, which generally involved remuneration, while ensuring that those concerns were never actually addressed. Robert Welch, who worked as a territorial wrestler for decades under the name Robert Fuller, described his grandfather Roy Welch as "a mean man, a brutal son of a gun." However, those attributes have never been a detriment for success in the professional wrestling business. As a child, if Robert fell asleep in the front seat when Roy Welch was driving an automobile, he would be awakened by a jarring slap to the chest.

Both Gulas and Welch knew that eliciting the heartfelt boos and cheers from a frenetic audience was an addictive thrill for most wrestlers. They were not in the business of overpaying their employees for this opportunity. Jack Brisco, a collegiate wrestling champion and one of the finest professional wrestlers to ever lace up a pair of boots, once described an early tour in the Gulas/Welch promotion as an "invaluable learning experience of all that I didn't want to know about this business."

The wrestling operation was based in Nashville and the matches occurred in that city's Hippodrome Roller Rink until the mid-1960s. The 40,000 square feet rink was used for big band performances, dances, skating parties, walking marathons, trade shows, basketball, Golden Gloves boxing, and even YMCA baseball games. Gulas promoted both wrestling and big band acts such as Benny Goodman and Harry James in the facility which could hold 3,000 fans. In 1984, Gulas remarked, "I don't believe there's a place left around here that meant so much to so many people as the Hippodrome." Christine "Teeny" Jarrett became an employee of Gulas of the wrestling promotion in the late 1940s, selling tickets part time for the Tuesday night events. The earliest life memories of her son, Jerry Jarrett, include being in the booth at the Hippodrome while his mother sold wrestling tickets. Teeny Jarrett would later work full time for the promotion. Of course, her son would as well.

The Gulas/Welch group was part of the *National Wrestling Alliance* which had been established basically to ensure that no competition could successfully enter into the established territories. Whenever an "outlaw" group, one not affiliated with the NWA, tried to compete in an NWA town, the alliance would work together to eliminate the competition. The Gulas/Welch territory was large enough that wrestlers could be booked on different ends of the promotion, with different television audiences and story lines. This gave the opportunity to keep wrestlers "fresh" in the eyes of an audience. And, if a wrestler needed a new gimmick, becoming a masked man was always a viable opportunity.

The promotion used local talent, touring national stars (such as Gorgeous George, Pat O'Connor, Gene Kiniski, and Lou Thesz), female wrestlers, midgets, and wild gimmicks to keep the audience entertained. Major stars in the 1950s and 1960s included "The Cadillac Man" Sputnik Monroe, Billy Wicks, Rowdy Red Roberts, Tojo Yamamoto, Jackie Fargo, Len Rossi, Oni Wiki Wiki, Herb Welch, Don Carson, and Bearcat Brown. The area had a significant emphasis on tag team wrestling to include Don and Al Greene, the Masked Medics (Donald Lortie and Tony Gonzales), the Infernos (Rocky Smith and Frankie Cain), the Interns (Jim Starr working with either Billy Garrett or Tom Andrews), the Fabulous Kangaroos (Al Costello working with Roy Heffernan or Dan Kent), Corsico Joe and Corsico Jean, Karl and Kurt Von Brauner (Doug Donovan working with either Jimmy Brawner, Red Donovan, or Willie Rutgowski), and Mephisto and Dante

(portrayed by Lou Papineau and Red Donovan, who was also known as Hans Steiner; this same team was later portrayed by Bobby Hart and Frankie Cain). The Mighty Yankees (Ed Sullivan, Charlie Fulton, Frank Morell, Jimmy Hines, Billy Hines, Pepe Lopez, Tony Russo) was such a hot gimmick that Gulas would have different wrestlers performing as the team on the same night in different cities.

The right heel manager created instant heat for the bad guys, so wrestlers were often teamed with mouth pieces/interferers such as Dr. Ken Ramey, Jim Kent, Gentleman Saul Weingeroff, J.C. Dykes, and Sam Bass. If a wrestler was bad enough to associate with those evil men, there's no telling what they would do in a ring. Often the managers were used to hype the matches when their charges lacked the requisite articulateness to do so.

The Tennessee territory was never known as one of the better paying ones on the professional wrestling circuit. While some of the headliners made good money, for many of the wrestlers it was a hand to mouth existence. Work required long drives to work the shows, little pay, and the constant possibility of legitimate physical injury. Many of the heels (bad guys) were so hated, they also had to worry about being attacked. Randy Colley of the Moondogs described his early years in the business as a non-stop search for "a cheap hotel and a cheap buffet." Often for a young wrestler, their automobile doubled as their residence.

Jerry Jarrett began selling wrestling programs at the Hippodrome when he was seven years and started working as an event coordinator for the promotion at the age of fourteen. Duties of an event coordinator included renting an armory or high school, putting up ads for the show, setting up chairs, and managing concessions for the event. He wasn't allowed backstage and had no knowledge of the inner workings of the business. After graduating from college, Jerry worked as a purchasing agent for a manufacturer for four years. After a disagreement over a management decision, Jarrett left the company and started working for the wrestling promotion on a part time basis.

It is not documented when professional wrestling matches were first held in Memphis by the Gulas/Welch promotion, but weekly cards were definitely held in the "Bluff City" in the early 1950s. Prior to the Gulas/Welch era, promoter Charles Rentrop promoted matches at the Hodges Field Bowl in the 1920s and 1930s, often drawing thousands of fans to the football field to see Depression Era touring grapplers Jim Londos (Christos Theofilou),

Milo Steinborn (Henry Steinborn), Orville Brown, and Chief Chewacki (George Mitchell).

Gulas and Welch promoted events at the multi-use Ellis Auditorium in Memphis. A 1953 match between Gorgeous George and Farmer Jones sold 7,000 tickets, at that time a record crowd for any event at the facility. (Farmer Jones was billed as being from Arkansas; his real name was Paul Jones and he always brought a small pig with him into the ring.) The first golden era of Memphis wrestling occurred in 1959 when two performers that started in the athletic shows on the carnival circuit, Sputnik Monroe and Billy Wicks, captured the imagination of the city. The heightened interest in the product was driven by the introduction of a weekly wrestling television program in Memphis. Jack Eaton, a young sports announcer with no distaste for hyperbole, lauded Billy Wicks as a great American and characterized Monroe as the personification of evil.

Jerry Jarrett began working as an event promoter again in the late 1960s. In a conversation with Tojo Yamamoto, Tojo asked Jarrett if he was “smart,” which was a question in wrestler’s code to find out if someone understood how professional wrestling worked. Jarrett responded by telling Tojo his college grade point average. Tojo replied, “No, you’re not smart” and then told the college graduate, who had been involved in wrestling his entire life, how the business really worked. He then gave Jerry the necessary training to be a referee. Working as a referee was a low paying job and most nights only one referee worked the entire evening, making the job physically demanding as well. Jerry learned the job could be dangerous as well when things got out of hand. One night in Cleveland, Tennessee a riot broke out which became, “a full blown battle between wrestlers and the crowd.” One wrestler was stabbed in the melee.

Jarrett did not enjoy the referee role and began training to become a wrestler. Sailor Moran and Tojo worked with him for several months. Jarrett debuted as a wrestler in the late 1960s, specializing in a sympathetic babyface role. Behind the scenes, Jarrett worked closely with Roy Welch, his mentor, and started booking the shows in Memphis. (The job of a “booker” is to determine which wrestlers will work on the cards, who gets pushed, what storylines are used to create interest, etc. A successful booker creates interest and draws money for the promotion). By this time, Jarrett’s mother had also become a full time office employee for Gulas/Welch.

Under the previous bookers, Memphis wrestling was not remarkably different from wrestling in any other city. Jarrett, who didn't have the traditional wrestler/tough guy approach to the business was not, as Lance Russell would later state, "afraid to try anything." If fans were more entertained by Roughhouse Fargo sitting on a lady's lap on the front row and eating her popcorn versus an extending scientific match, then popcorn it was. Jarrett delighted the Memphis audience with concession stand brawls, scaffold matches, blood feuds, chains, and chair shots. While many wrestling promoters were larger than life personalities, Jarrett was comparatively low key, yet excelled both in the business and creative aspects of wrestling. In the ring, he became a genuine headliner.

In 1970, the aggressive young Jarrett began expanding the promotion into Louisville and Lexington, Kentucky and Evansville, Indiana. This expansion also required further education on how the territorial business of professional wrestling was managed. Although Dick the Bruiser (former professional football player turned wrestler William Afflis) and his business partner Wilbur Snyder were not regularly promoting cards in Louisville and Evansville, they still had the "rights" to the towns under the *National Wrestling Alliance*. For over a decade, Jarrett was required to pay Afflis and Snyder 10% of the profits from those towns, even though they did not provide any talent or promote the cards in any way. The towns promoted by Jerry, with assistance from Teeny Jarrett, became known as the western end of the Tennessee territory.

In the 1950s, the wrestling matches in Memphis were held in the "Ellis Auditorium" at 255 North Main Street in Memphis. Matches would later move to the Cook Convention Center and in the early 1970s to the Mid-South Coliseum. Many performers have stated that the Coliseum was one of the best venues in the country for wrestling. Wayde Bowles, professionally known as Rocky Johnson, noted in the 2011 documentary *Memphis Heat: The True Story of Memphis Wrasslin'*, "Everybody's goal, even mine, when you started wrestling, 'I gotta wrestle in Madison Square Garden.' It took me fifteen years to get to Madison Square Garden. It didn't mean half as much as it did when I was in the Memphis Coliseum. I broke out in goose bumps. It was unreal."

Soon, events in Atlanta would raise Jarrett's stock in the wrestling world. In 1972, Ray Gunkel, who was working as the booker and primarily running the Atlanta promotion, passed away after a match with Ox Baker. Ann

Gunkel, Ray's widow, was an attractive businesswoman who wanted to become actively involved in the promotion, but did not get along with the other business partners, Buddy Fuller (the son of Roy Welch, whose real name is Edward Welch) or Lester Welch. Ann Gunkel worked with Atlanta television executive Ted Turner and started her own promotion, *All-South Wrestling Alliance*, featuring almost all of the stars that had previously worked for *Georgia Championship Wrestling*.

Gunkel's promotion was not sanctioned by the *National Wrestling Alliance* and the NWA rallied around Lester Welch in an effort to get Gunkel out of the business. In 1973, promoter Jim Barnett was trying to get back to the states after promoting successfully for many years in Australia and bought the NWA Atlanta territory from Welch. Barnett asked Jarrett to help book Atlanta to get his new promotion established. Jarrett developed a successful feud between Terry Garvin and Lou Thesz that emphasized the effeminate side of Garvin's personality (Garvin was a homosexual that would later be involved in a major sex scandal while working for the *World Wrestling Federation* in an office capacity). Jarrett also transformed veteran grappler Johnny Walker into Mr. Wrestling II, who became a phenomenon in the city. A few years later, Walker would get more publicity when Lillian Carter, the mother of President Jimmy Carter, stated that Mr. Wrestling II was her favorite wrestler.

While Jarrett was reestablishing the NWA brand in Atlanta, Memphis was not drawing well in his absence. Gulas/Welch offered Jerry 10% ownership in the company to come back. Prior to 1977, Jarrett would purchase what he thought was an additional 40% of the company, in his mind becoming co-owner.

In 1974, Nick's son George Gulas got into the wrestling game. His complete absence of charisma and coordination did not stop Nick from not only having his son wrestle, but he also attempted to turn George into a major star. Jarrett did not want to book George Gulas on his cards, which created friction between the two men, who were business partners but certainly not friends. Jarrett felt that Nick was pushing George to the extent that it was hurting the territory. There were also financial disputes between the two men, as it turned out from a legal perspective, Jarrett's expected ownership in the company was not legitimately executed.

In 1977, Jarrett severed his business relationship with Gulas and started promoting on his own. Jarrett has publicly stated that Nick's insistence on

using George as a top star was the reason for the split. The financial dispute with Nick Gulas and Roy Welch's failing health were most likely more important factors. The promotion had basically been split into two circuits for years and Jarrett knew that the Memphis side of the promotion was the most profitable portion of the territory. For political cover with the *National Wrestling Alliance*, Jarrett made Buddy Fuller, Roy Welch's son, his partner in the new company.

For his new promotion, Jarrett received a Saturday morning timeslot on WMC, Channel 5 in Memphis. The Gulas/Welch promotion had been broadcast on WHBQ television, Channel 13 in Memphis. WHBQ dropped wrestling when Jarrett started the new program, giving Gulas no timeslot to air a program. WMC also benefited when the announcing team of Lance Russell and Dave Brown moved to channel 5. Lance had worked as a television programming director and Brown was (and remains) a popular weatherman. Jarrett kept the biggest drawing card in the territory, as Lawler stayed with Jarrett and earned a percentage of the Memphis profits. Tojo Yamamoto and Jackie Fargo stayed loyal to Gulas, but without having television in the Memphis market, their name value meant little. Having no vehicle to promote the city, Gulas pulled out of Memphis after a short period of time. Gulas promoted for a few more years in Nashville, Chattanooga, Birmingham, and Huntsville. After more than four decades as a promoter, Gulas was unable to continue by 1980. He made a few minor attempts at establishing new promotions in the Nashville area later in the 1980s without success. Nick Gulas passed away in 1991. Christine Jarrett, the lady he had hired to sell wrestling tickets part time in the 1940s, paid for his funeral.

During the early 1980s, the expansion of cable television had a major impact on professional wrestling. *Georgia Championship Wrestling* from Atlanta and the *World Wrestling Federation*, among others, were being broadcast on national cable outlets. When Vince McMahon Jr. bought the *World Wrestling Federation* from his father, he broke wrestling tradition by aggressively promoting in cities "owned" by other promoters. The era of a cooperative alliance to keep "outlaw" promotions from invading an existing territory was ending.

The Memphis promotion continued to do consistently good business through the early 1980s, but as the decade wore on, it became apparent that the traditional wrestling territory was losing viability. The WWF was

expanding rapidly, purchasing some territories, such as Georgia Championship Wrestling, creating the event known as “Black Saturday” among mat circles, or destroying them through competition. While many territories were fatally wounded and went away quickly, the Memphis promotion crept along. Crowds that once regularly numbered in the thousands, and often reached peaks above 11,000 in attendance, dwindled into the hundreds. The promotion quietly went out of business in 1997. The slow and inevitable end of Memphis wrestling, however, neither tarnishes nor diminishes the joy and excitement and unrivaled passion that the company inspired at its best. From Sputnik Monroe to Jackie Fargo, from Jerry Lawler to Austin Idol, Memphis wrestling was a place where giants roamed the earth on a weekly basis. Every Monday night at the Mid-South Coliseum, fans stomped and cheered and cried at the antics of the performers. Teenage boys in the front row would throw punches in the air, mimicking the action in the ring. Wrestlers were loved and hated, adored and demonized with a fervor that bordered on fanaticism. Young men idolized Jerry Lawler while their younger sisters dreamed about the Rock ‘n’ Roll Express. The coolest kid on the schoolyard would outsmart a foe, then crack up his friends with a perfectly timed Fargo strut. From the early 1970s to the mid 1980s, Memphis wrestling was as much of the culture of the area as pulled pork and coleslaw, rock ‘n’ roll, and the Mississippi River. At its best, Memphis wrestling was a white knuckle, rollercoaster magical joyride.

Lance Russell and Dave Brown

"Yello, again, everybody, Lance Russell and Dave Brown, right along ringside for another BIG day of Championship Wrestling," Lance Russell's weekly introduction of Championship Wrestling.

For years, the Memphis wrestling program had the simplest introduction imaginable. A camera focused on a rotating Greek wrestling statue while the dramatic "Sunrise" fanfare from "Also sprach Zarathustra" blared in all of its grandiose glory. The classical Richard Strauss composition was more popularly known as the intro music to the popular Stanley Kubrick film *2001: A Space Odyssey* or, most assuredly not a coincidence, as the music played before Elvis Presley walked onstage at his concerts. If you were a wrestling junkie, the adrenaline would kick in as you waited for Lance Russell's familiar homespun greeting, "Yello, again…". (In the mid-1980s, the introduction was modified with wrestling clips and music from Walter Murphy's "Russian Dressing (Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No 1).")

Aside from Jerry Lawler, Lance Russell may be the person most commonly associated with Memphis wrestling. Russell grew up a wrestling fan in Dayton, Ohio and broke into television at a young age, both working as a sports anchor and as a program director. Covering sports, such as high school athletics and boxing, gave him a feel for announcing live events. His career as a wrestling announcer began when he started calling the matches for Nick Gulas and Roy Welch in Jackson, Tennessee in the late 1950s. In 1959, Memphis wrestling debuted on WMC Channel 5 with Jack Eaton, who served as that station's sports director and lead announcer until 1991, calling the action. Later that year, the program moved to WHBG Channel 13 and Lance Russell became the host.

Trenton, Tennessee native Dave Brown began working in radio at the age of fifteen and started working as a disc jockey on WHBQ radio in 1964 while attending school. In 1967, Lance Russell, who in addition to his announcing duties was also working as the station program manager, asked Brown to co-host the wrestling program. Brown's television hosting duties expanded into other aspects of the programming in 1968 and in 1972 he was selected for the noon weathercaster slot. He would quickly move up the ranks and become the most popular meteorologist in the Memphis television market.

As the program director, Lance Russell made the decision to air the Memphis wrestling on Saturday morning, a slot that had been traditionally

been used for cartoons. While some thought that the violent edge of a professional wrestling program was a poor fit for morning television, it actually became the perfect lead in for other sporting events, such as college football or major league baseball. A 1977 article in *The Commercial Appeal* stated that the ratings for the Memphis wrestling program were comparable to a Sunday night World Series game or the highest rated network shows during that timeframe. At its peak, it has been reported that Memphis wrestling regularly drew spectacular ratings in the 20 to 25% range. The "rating" measures the percentage of the population with televisions that were watching the program. According to Dave Meltzer of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, the "share" regularly reached 70 percent in the early 1980s, meaning that 70 percent of the households in the market that were watching any program while Memphis wrestling was on the air, were watching the wrestling program.

Lance and Dave worked together like a well oiled machine. Lance had the emotional investment in the action, building excitement as matches progressed or displaying pleasure, outrage, or disgust over the proceedings. Dave Brown was low key, but provided a credibility factor in his more measured approach. At the end of each show, Brown would dutifully go over the results of the studio wrestling action and would also report the length of time for each contest. Lance later praised Brown's ability to both work in a structured television environment and to ad-lib as the situation required. In October of 2009, Brown reminisced to Jerry Wiseman of the *Columbus Pro Wrestling Examiner*, "I always viewed my role as the guardian of sanity as the events swirled around us." In 2007, Jerry Lawler discussed Brown's contribution with Michael Lollar of *The Commercial Appeal* (the predominant daily newspaper in Memphis), "The great thing was that in wrestling you had such outlandish characters. The contrast was just terrific between Dave and those guys. Dave was very reserved on the show. The whole allure of a weatherman is that people had to believe the forecast. So even though he was on a wrestling show, which makes some people a little skeptical, he had to maintain his credibility."

Jerry Jarrett has stated that the announcers were absolutely critical to the territory. Since the announcers have the majority of the air time for a wrestling program, the ability to sustain interest is vital. Jarrett also kept his team from overselling the quality of average cards. He instructed them, if they thought the card was average, not to say, "this is going to be a great

card, don’t miss it.” This surprising restraint helped the territory to effectively promote bigger events. When Lance and Dave said that a card was a “must see” event, the fans knew it would be a special night of action. The market value of both men played an important part in Memphis wrestling history when Jerry Jarrett split from Nick Gulas in 1977. After the split, WHBQ made the decision to drop the wrestling program, rather than take sides between the newly competing promoters. Jarrett and Jerry Lawler then paid a visit to WMC’s general manager Mori Greiner and program director Philip Slavik. Wrestling was the top rated local program in the Memphis market, so Jarrett had ratings as a leverage tool in getting a new slot. Additionally, Jarrett was able to bring both Lance Russell and Dave Brown to WMC. At that time, WHBQ was the top rated local station and Russell was the program director. WMC was able to remove a top competitor from a programming slot, get the top weather forecaster in the market, and air the top rated show in the market in one fell swoop. Within a year after Memphis wrestling moved to WMC, the station went from being the third rated station in the market to the top rated station.

For a few weeks during the transition, the show on WMC was hosted by local television personalities Clay Conrad and Bob Young. Lawler was quoted in *The Commercial Appeal* in 1977, in an article that stated that Lance Russell would not be leaving WHBQ, as saying, “He seems to be the perfect foil for my insults. My only problem will be getting used to an announcer without a big nose.” However, it did not take long for Lance Russell and his partner, “Davey,” to make the leap. Having the continuity in the announcing team most surely was a great benefit to Jerry Jarrett as he started his new promotion.

The chemistry between Lawler and Lance Russell was an important aspect of the program. When Lawler was a hated heel, he would insult Lance in a comical way, such as his constant reference to Russell as “Banana Nose” or bringing attention to his “Baxter suits,” once noting that one of the suits had “shined itself to death.” Lawler never displayed contempt for Russell. As a babyface, Lance would beam at Lawler like a proud parent after a major victory. He would also warn Lawler not to take a particular heel too lightly, noting that a latest foe was a particular threat to Lawler’s status in his unending quest to become World Champion or show empathy when “The King” suffered a disappointing loss. When Jimmy Hart was the lead heel manager for the promotion, Russell’s projected an endless supply of

exasperation in response Hart's devious antics. Lance Russell had a phenomenal talent in displaying his emotional investment in the action, which led the audience to the reactions that the promotion desired. Lance never lost his well honed ability to project incredulous disbelief ("For crying out loud!").

Lance Russell had both a comprehensive knowledge of the business and a simple, colloquial charm. An unexpected moment would bring out a "What in the Sam Hill…?" When a heel was ranting about some injustice, Lance would simply interject, "I hear ya," letting the wrestler make his talking points. After one of the weekly melees in front of the desk, Lance would yell at the heels to "get on out of here." When particularly enraged, he might comment, "And I don't care if you don't ever come back!" With the live studio action, Memphis wrestling often had a loose, freewheeling "let's put on a show" feel, but Lance was always able to elevate the tone of the show. Occasionally, Lance would be physically involved in the action, memorably being choked by the Dream Machine (Troy Graham) and slapped by Bill Dundee. In Jimmy Hart's last appearance in Memphis wrestling, he dumped a bag of flour on Lance, which resulted in Hart being immediately "suspended" from the show. Regarding the flour incident, Dave Brown wryly recalled years later in a Memphis wrestling forum emceed by Scott Bowden, "I'm thinking that I'm gonna have to do the rest of the show on my own - now that Lance has turned into a giant biscuit."

However, the business relationship between Lance Russell and Jerry Jarrett was not without difficulties. In the early 1980s, Jerry Lawler, unsatisfied with his compensation as the lead star in the promotion, explored breaking away from Jarrett and starting his own promotion. Due to the need to have someone with knowledge of the broadcasting business in the venture, he asked Lance Russell to be his partner. When Jarrett was informed of Lawler's intent, Lawler was made co-owner of the Memphis territory. However, Jarrett was extremely unhappy with Lance's involvement in the proposed new promotion. Jarrett later told wrestling historian Tim Dills, "I had promised Jerry Lawler an additional percentage of the company after we were up and running and profitable. We got started and got up and running and profitable. I simply forgot to make the transfer and Lawler never brought it to my attention. Because of this, when Lawler advised me that he was going to go into business for himself, I thought he had justification. While I thought it was childish that he did not bring up the

issue, it was wrong of me to forget about something so important. I advised Lawler of my feelings and he understood both his fault and mine in the situation. We solved our differences within a thirty minute conversation. The situation with Lance Russell was entirely different. Lance had received his pay check every week from me while planning to run against me. I felt this was dishonorable and never held Lance in high regard after the incident. I advised Lawler of my feelings and he agreed that the circumstances were very different. I gave Lance the option of leaving or taking a rather large reduction in pay."

Despite those professional differences, Lance continued with the promotion until 1989, leaving to accept a position with *World Championship Wrestling* (WCW). When he left, Dave Brown paid tribute to his long time partner on the air, "I do want to take just a moment of time to say something to someone who's very special to me. He spent many, many years sitting right here in this chair. Of course, I'm talking about none other than Lance Russell. Lance, as many of you know, has accepted another job. Now Lance and I have worked in the same building for twenty-five years. We've shared this desk for twenty-two years, so it's gonna take some getting used to, sitting here and not having Lance beside us. Lance to me personally has been everything from an acquaintance to a co-worker to a boss to a teacher. He's responsible for much of the success that I've been able to enjoy in this television business and he's also, perhaps more importantly, a friend and will continue to be a friend. Lance, you know I wish you happiness and I'm sure all the fans all around the territory wish you the very, very best." Dave Brown stated in 2009 that after knowing Lance for 45 years, the two men "never had a cross word or negative moment between us."

Lance would return to the Memphis promotion in 1994 and both Lance and Dave Brown were involved in various Memphis wrestling ventures in the late 1990s and early 2000s (at one point even working on competing programs). Lance has been recognized as one of the premier announcers from the territorial wrestling era and is a member of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* Hall of Fame, the *National Wrestling Alliance* Hall of Fame, and the NWA Wrestling Legends Hall of Heroes. Dave Brown has continued his broadcasting career in Memphis television and has done work in support of Mothers Against Drunk Drivers (MADD). Memphis wrestling never had a better tag team combination than Lance Russell and Dave Brown.

Sputnik Monroe

“It’s hard to be humble when you are 235 pounds of twisted steel and sex appeal with a body women love and men fear.”
He was born Roscoe Monroe Merrick on December 18, 1928. He passed away on November 3, 2006, after decades of wrestling and drinking and chasing women. When we wasn’t wrestling or drinking or chasing women, most likely he was talking about wrestling or drinking or chasing women. He was “The Cadillac and Diamond Ring Man.” He was “The Sweet Man.” In the mat game, Sputnik’s advised, “Win if you can, lose if you must, always cheat, and if they take you out leave tearing the ring down.” After his death, Lance Russell told wrestling columnist Mike Mooneyham, “Sputnik was a force. He was a guy who made a difference. There just was never anyone exactly like him. There’s the Jerry Lawlers, the Jackie Fargos, the Ric Flairs, and all these guys who are great in their own right, but Sputnik Monroe was an absolute one-of-a-kind-character.”
Sputnik grew up in Dodge City, where he worked in his stepfather’s bakery. When he wasn’t at the bakery, he was learning how to wrestle at the local YMCA. His grandfather taught him to box. Before he was of legal age, he joined the United States Navy, serving a three year stint. After leaving the military, he spent several years working as a wrestler on the carnival circuit. The wrestlers at the carnival shows worked endlessly with each other on submission maneuvers. The referees were often local “marks,” who would often be rooting for the hometown challenger. This could result in a slow pin count or no count at all. Ensuring the local tough guys would submit was the most effective way of decisively ending the contest. Of course, besides knowing submissions maneuvers, the carnival shows also had an extra advantage - knowing the spot in the ring that had no padding whatsoever. Many a young service member or college student learned about this hard spot at the same time their nose was being shoved into it.
When the wrestling action was slow, Monroe would work the carnival games, all of which were fixed. The barker mentality and learning how to talk people into separating their greenbacks from their wallet most assuredly helped Monroe transition into the regular professional wrestling

circuit. Later in life, Monroe stated to wrestling historian Scott Teal that as a wrestler, “I operated on my abilities to talk.”

In 1954, Monroe transitioned from the carnival shows to territorial professional wrestling. His worked under the name Pretty Boy Rocque, doing a variation of Gorgeous George’s act, complete with sequined robes and pink shoes. A promoter in Louisville, which was not part of the Memphis circuit in the 1950s, gave him a new gimmick, Elvis Rock Monroe. Sputnik wore his hair like Elvis while working this gimmick and brought a guitar to the ring. He later joked that he was usually beaten with his own guitar.

During this timeframe, young wrestlers were generally only booked in a territory for a short period of time, from six to eight weeks. The pre-Sputnik Monroe was traveling throughout the country, from Utah to New York, working for different promoters. A match in Chicago had a peculiar long term impact. After being bashed with a laminated chair, a sliver remained in Monroe’s head. Once the sliver was removed, white hair started growing from the infected area. Later this hair would change color and Monroe dyed it white to retain his trademark skunk appearance.

In 1958, Monroe went to Mobile, Alabama, where Buddy Fuller was the local promoter. Monroe had been traveling from the Pacific Northwest and grew too tired to finish the drive. On his way, he picked up a young, black hitchhiker and asked the man to drive for him. When he arrived at the television studio, one woman expressed her outrage at seeing Sputnik arm in arm with the black male. Wanting to further infuriate her, Sputnik pretended to kiss the man. The lady responded by spewing a stream of obscenities that ended with calling Monroe, “a damn Sputnik,” which was a reference to the Soviet Union (i.e., Communist) space satellite. The local announcers began using the name, although Monroe did not originally understand the reference. It was also in Mobile that Monroe met the man who he would be forever associated with in Memphis wrestling, Billy Wicks. Monroe was the arrogant, strutting loud mouth and he described Wicks as, “the blue-eyed, blonde-headed, All-American boy.”

Buddy Fuller left Mobile for Memphis and brought Wicks and Monroe into the territory, which had been suffering from low attendance prior to Fuller’s arrival. Wicks versus Monroe captured the imagination of the Memphis fans, creating a demand that exceeded the seating capacity of the Ellis Auditorium. Monroe was a tireless self-promoter, who would create scenes

throughout the community to promote matches. He spent significant time on Beale Street, always in “character” wearing flashy outfits and hyping his toughness. His had an interesting relationship with the black community and it’s almost impossible to know at this point where reality and hyperbole meet on this issue.

Monroe is generally credited with integrating wrestling matches in Memphis and has even been called a major figure in civil rights for his efforts. What is known is that wrestling matches at the Ellis Auditorium were segregated before Sputnik’s arrival. A smaller section in the balcony was reserved for black patrons. Sputnik seemed to genuinely enjoy socializing with members of the black community at a time when it was not acceptable to do so, especially in the South. He was even arrested and fined on at least one occasion for drinking a beer in a “black” establishment in Memphis. There is, unsurprisingly, more than one account on how the integration occurred. Monroe stated late in his life that he gave away increasing numbers of discount tickets weekly on Beale Street, creating a demand that exceeded the limited seats for the African-American section. Monroe claimed that he threatened to quit the promotion if the auditorium didn’t make the required changes to seat his black fans.

Memphis music legend Jim Dickinson described a different tactic in Robert Gordon’s book *It Came From Memphis.* Dickinson stated that two sets of tickets were sold in Memphis, one for black patrons and one for white customers. Dickinson claimed that Sputnik paid off the Ellis Auditorium employee that counted the attendance for black customers, so that when asked how many blacks were in attendance, the man would give a low number. Under this theory, the Auditorium sold more tickets to African-Americans than their small balcony section could hold.

When remembering that time in history for Monroe’s obituary in the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, Lance Russell had a different view on what occurred. While it was true that Monroe wasn’t happy that there were empty seats in the “white sections,” neither were the promoters. An empty seat equated to less money in everyone’s pocket. The promoters were looking for a way to integrate the matches without elevating racial tension (i.e., losing white customers) in the process. By integrating the matches in conjunction with Sputnik’s vocal demands, any fan dissatisfaction could be directed toward the promotion’s top heel. While historical accounts differ on this issue as well, it is generally believed that while the black community

enjoyed Monroe's antics, they still rooted for Wicks to beat him when the bell rang. In this hope, both races were aligned.

Southern promoters often struggled with the race issue, wanting to draw African-American fans, but not to the point that their presence would make their more affluent white customers uncomfortable. In the 1960s, Memphis cards would sometimes feature a "Top Colored Men's Match," with touring African-American stars such as Sailor Art Thomas and Conway Junior. These bouts had a side attraction aura, similar to female and midget wrestling. Eventually Matt Jewell, who worked as "Bearcat Brown," would be accepted as a top babyface in the promotion, teaming with Len Rossi. Rossi was one of the top stars on the circuit and would hold tag team titles on over thirty occasions. The gimmick for Bearcat Brown was that he had an incredibly hard head, perhaps enhanced by a steel plate, and would head butt his opponents into submission.

While the motivation and the process may be impossible to ascertain, it is undeniable that the matches were integrated when Monroe was the top drawing card in the promotion. The Memphis Rock 'N' Soul Museum later honored "The Sweet Man" with a display featuring wrestling memorabilia and a plaque that stated, "Sputnik Monroe played a major part in destroying the color lines in Memphis."

The crowd of over 13,000 that watched Wicks and Monroe wrestle at Russwood Park in August of 1959 set an attendance record for Memphis that was not broken for several decades. In September of that year, Monroe decided to get some additional publicity. He was regrettably successful. Gene Barry, who portrayed Bat Masterson on television, was a featured star at the rodeo that year. Sputnik felt like he could get some great publicity if he started a fight with Barry, with the justification that he wasn't a real cowboy. His efforts to get to Barry that evening were unsuccessful.

What happened next is, of course, open to speculation. There are stories that Monroe started mouthing off to the rodeo cowboys, escalating the situation to include elbowing or punching a horse. In any event, some incident went from talking to fisticuffs. *The Commercial Appeal* quoted a bystander who said that the cowboy "popped Monroe right in the face and knocked him down. Then he really went to town on Monroe." The local promoter, Buddy Fuller, was enraged that his wrestler was exposed in this way. Stories vary on what happened next. In one version of the story, the cowboy was legitimately challenged and backed out, thinking that he was being

manipulated by a trained grappler that was intent on hurting him. The other version of events is that the cowboy was challenged, but the promotion knew he was out of town on the traveling rodeo circuit. For what it's worth, Monroe maintained that he was not harmed in this incident and gave credit to Billy Wicks for his pretty new black eye. Perhaps it was this particular night that caused an older Monroe to muse to wrestling journalist Scott Teal, that he was once, "Young, dumb, and full of bubble gum."

After the hot program with Wicks ran its course, Sputnik continued to be a featured performer in Memphis through early 1960. Monroe double crossed Wicks in February, resulting in a "barrage of rotten eggs and tomatoes" being hurled at his residence according to *The Commercial Appeal*. It may have surprised the public that "The Cadillac and Diamond Ring Man" lived in a trailer. (The paper was also kind enough to print his home address, which I'm sure resulted in more food bomb deliveries).

Throughout the 1960s, Monroe toured several promotions. He went with Buddy Fuller to Arizona for a lengthy stay in 1962 and worked many of the western states, often in the main event. He had several tag team runs with "Rocket" Monroe (wrestler Bill Fletcher was "Rocket" in the early 1960s, grappler Maury High became the new "Rocket" model in 1965). Sputnik, Rocket (Fletcher), and Sputnik's real life brother, Gary, worked in New York in 1964, but never made into the main events. Gary was in a managerial role with the name Jet Monroe.

Monroe worked the West Texas circuit, owned by Dory Funk, Sr., on several occasions. He was Terry Funk's first opponent in 1965 in an interesting debut. As the heel, Sputnik was calling the match and giving Terry no offense, knowingly abusing the green rookie. Dory was watching from the back, getting increasingly frustrated, watching his son selling continuously for Monroe. Promoters often would build their territory around their sons and having a weak first impression for Terry would not beneficial for Dory's long term business interest. To alleviate the situation, Dory stormed to the ringside and verbally demanded that Terry start his comeback. Terry, the future NWA World Champion, got his hand raised that night. In 1968, Monroe would headline against another future world champion that would work regularly in Memphis, future American Wrestling Association (AWA) Champion Nick Bockwinkel.

Monroe also had successful feuds with Don Fargo in the Georgia territory and Eddie Graham in Florida. He also worked extensively for Leroy

McGuirk's Oklahoma based promotion. In addition to booking his own territory, McGuirk also booked the NWA Junior Heavyweight Champion, which often toured throughout the country, similar to the NWA World Heavyweight Champion.

Monroe won the Junior Heavyweight Championship from Danny Hodge in July of 1970. Hodge, who was incredibly strong and won the NCAA championship three years in a row in amateur wrestling, viewed the mat game with utmost seriousness. Bill Watts was booking the territory at the time and Monroe had unwisely gotten on his bad side. Since McGuirk controlled the belt, Watts couldn't simply have Monroe lose the strap. Instead, Watts booked Monroe in several sixty minute time limit draws with Hodge, who didn't believe in rest holds or grandstanding. Watts booked the two men together for three straight weeks in Greenville, Mississippi, and Hodge became enraged when some of the crowd started rooting for Monroe. Hodge was being so stiff in the ring, Monroe ended the run by demanding to lose the belt. He later remarked, "There's really no way I know of to beat a guy that can break electrician's pliers with his hands."

Monroe spent some time during 1970 on Ed Farhat's Michigan and Ohio circuit. James Fanning (Jimmy Valiant) would later recall how gracious Sputnik was, spending time with Valiant, Dick Murdoch, and Dusty Rhodes, teaching them the art of the wrestling interview.

Monroe worked his last memorable angle in Memphis in 1971, teaming with a young Norvell Austin. Having a tag team with a white and black man was still largely uncharted territory in the South, although Len Rossi and Bearcat Brown were a successful babyface tag team during this timeframe. After complaining to local Memphis musicians that he couldn't get the crowd to hate him as enthusiastically as they had in the past (a common problem with aging heel wrestlers), Skip Owsley advised Monroe that what society really hated now was hippies. The best way to be hated would be to talk about love.

After winning a tag team match on television, Monroe and Austin poured a bucket of black paint over Robert Fuller. "Black is beautiful," yelled Monroe. "White is beautiful," screamed Austin, while showing off the new prominent white streak in his hair. The two then hugged each other and concluded, "Black and white is beautiful." Monroe got his hate back.

Monroe would go on to work with Austin in the Gulf Coast area, in Florida, and a tour of Japan. Sputnik later described the relationship to Scott Teal,

“Norvell was a young kid when we teamed up together and he was in total awe of me. But I was freshly divorced and I needed him as much as he needed me. I probably needed him more than he needed me. He filled a void for me and I love him like he was mine.”

When Memphis wrestling moved to the Mid-South Coliseum in 1971, Sputnik proclaimed to Woodrow Paige, Jr. of *The Commercial Appeal*, with typical modesty, “I probably am responsible for building this coliseum. They didn’t have enough room anywhere else for me to wrestle.”

In 1973, Monroe was back in Georgia, working with Rocket Monroe (Maury High) as part of the wrestling war in Atlanta. The duo had been tag team champions in Florida in 1967, but this time they had a short run. Maury later reflected, “Sputnik was probably one of the best performers in and out of the ring that there ever was, but he let the juice and his mouth ruin him.”

As the 70s continued, Sputnik started working in opening matches or in smaller outlaw promotions. He wrestling style was to take a number of big bumps while selling for his opponent and that wrestling style may have caused his body to break down. The heavy drinking probably aged him as well. The lifestyle that led him through six marriages probably took a toll. (Sputnik used to joke with the boys that he was going to marry the ugliest woman he could find, in the hopes that a hideous wife would stay with him).

In 1980, Sputnik worked for a short spell as a manager for the Memphis territory. In the locker room, one of the wrestlers asked Jerry why the Poffo’s ICW promotion spent so much time talking about the Memphis wrestlers. Jerry responded by saying, “I can’t tell you. I don’t know how stupid people think.” Sputnik immediately jumped up and volunteered, “By God, I can tell how they think!” The dressing room broke out into hysterics while Jerry egged on Sputnik, “Really, Sputnik? Tell me, how do stupid people think?” Monroe donned his hat, told everyone that they could have sex with themselves, and vacated the premises.

Billy Wicks credited Sputnik with teaching him the professional wrestling game and stayed in touch with him throughout his life. After Monroe passed away in November of 2006, Wicks told Mike Mooneyham, “He was a very big-hearted guy, but he was a con man at the same time. But I loved the guy. I really cried at first and got very emotional, but now I’m

celebrating. Like I told him, he was a hero to me but certainly not a role model."

Sputnik's influence continued in popular culture during the 2000s and after his death. From 2006 to 2009, a Los Angeles based experimental rock band named "Sputnik Monroe" released three albums. The producers of the wrestling documentary *Memphis Heat* proclaimed 24 March, 2011, the date the movie was released, as the first national "Sputnik Monroe Day." Not bad for a man who partially became famous by calling his audience "liver-lipped little pukes."

Billy Wicks

"He could hurt the hell out of you," Don (Kalt) Fargo on Billy Wicks.

On August 17, 1959, Sputnik Monroe faced Billy Wicks (some sources report his real name as Bill Wickston) at Russwood Park, a minor league baseball facility, in Memphis, Tennessee. Over the years, the reported attendance for the event has grown as high as 20,000, but the local paper reported the crowd as 13,749 with more than 4,000 turned away due to lack of seating room. Legendary boxing champion Rocky Marciano served as the referee for the bout. In the third fall, wrestler Chico Cortez tried to interfere on Sputnik's behalf and both he and Monroe received a haymaker from the champ. The event ended in a no contest decision. Rocky Marciano received $5,000 for his efforts that evening. Both Sputnik and Wicks received $500, performing in front of one of the largest crowds in Memphis wrestling history.

Wicks grew up in St. Paul, Minnesota and began amateur wrestling as a teenager. He learned amateur wrestling at various places in the community including the Alder Boys Club, the YMCA, and by training with the Macalester College wrestling team. After a chance meeting with a female professional wrestler, he started training at an informal gym above the Dutchman's Bar in St. Paul. It was in this setting that the learned how to be a "hooker," which means having the skill to apply a variety of painful submission wrestling holds. Knowledge of how to legitimately handle oneself was seen as crucial in the early days of professional wrestling as one could be challenged either inside the ring by a testy opponent or on the streets by a fan. This ability was held in such high regard that perennial *National Wrestling Alliance* champion Lou Thesz, who thought that Wicks was a "terrific wrestler," titled his autobiography *Hooker: An Authentic Wrestler's Adventures Inside the Bizarre World of Professional Wrestling*.

Wicks was trained in hooking by Henry Kohlen, who was taught by the legendary Martin "Farmer" Burns. In 1985, Burns had defeated Evan "Strangler" Lewis for the American Heavyweight Championship and later trained World Heavyweight Champion Frank Gotch. Wicks learned his lessons well. He enjoyed working a tough, physical style in the ring. Sputnik Monroe referred to him as "granite hands."

Wicks broke into wrestling on the carnival circuit. Local tough men would receive five dollars if they could last five minutes with the trained shooters.

One of the tricks to ensure no money went to the public was to place another wrestler behind the tent with a blackjack, who could make an unseen hit in the head when the challenger was properly positioned. The wrestlers would also work programs during the week to maintain interest. One of the wrestlers would work as a plant, referred to as “a stick,” and would work scripted matches lasting five minutes with a few of the wrestlers. This would build to a match with the circuit “star” before the conclusion of the fair.

Almost none of the locals ever lasted five minutes with the trained professionals, who knew that untrained challengers would used all of their energy quickly and be susceptible to submission holds. A barker would goad the men in the crowd with taunts such as, “Come on, big guy. You think you’re tough because you can slap your girlfriend around? Let’s see what you can do.” Wicks received $10 for his first weekend of work, making the marks submit in Micala, Minnesota. He thought he was a rich man. (The term “mark” or “easy mark” comes from the carny tradition. Once the carnies found someone who was gullible to their scams, they would literally put a mark on the back of the hapless victim. This let other carnies know where to focus their attention).

Rolland “Red” Bastien, who had worked the carnival circuit with Wicks, helped Wicks get booked in professional wrestling, getting him jobs in Portland, Oregon and then in Houston, Texas. Wicks was disappointed that the professional wrestling circuit didn’t involve legitimate athletic competition, but he did enjoy the opportunity to travel. Wicks received his first singles push in September of 1958, defeating Buddy Fuller for a belt billed as both the Gulf Coast Heavyweight Title and the Gulf Coast Junior Heavyweight Title. Buddy was the son of Roy Welch, who owned the territory, and Buddy was booking the promotion. The Gulf Coast promotion was sold to Roy Welch’s nephew Lee Fields in 1959.

In 1958, Wicks began his feud with Sputnik Monroe, not in Memphis, but in the Gulf Coast territory. Wicks credits Monroe for teaching him how to work as a professional wrestler. In November of 1958, Wicks won the Gulf Coast belt from Gorgeous George. He lost the belt to Lee Fields on 24 December, but had been attacked by Monroe before the match. In December of 1958, Buddy Fuller became the local event promoter/booker in Memphis and immediately gave Wicks a main event push. He also brought another wrestler from Gulf Coast at the same time, Sputnik

Monroe. The two men split their time between the two territories for several months.

Wicks and Yvon “The Lion” Roberts (billed as Yvonne Roberre) defeated Corsica Joe and Corsica Jean for the NWA (Mid American) World Tag Team Title in Memphis on January 5, 1959. At the card the next week, Wicks and Roberts dropped the straps back to the Corsica Brothers. Wicks stayed on the top of the card for several months, either in single matches or teaming with a variety of partners. When he wasn’t in the main event, generally Monroe was. From April through June, the Memphis cards advertised tournament matches to determine a new Tennessee state champion and the winner would also received a new Cadillac. Wicks defeated Monroe in the tournament finals.

Buddy Fuller had spent all year promoting his two hot new stars. Sputnik Monroe was the cocky, arrogant, strutting heel. Billy Wicks was the handsome, talented babyface. The public demand was outgrowing the capacity of Ellis Auditorium. The card on 22 June was held at Crump Stadium, the largest football field in the city. On 2 August, Fuller booked a card at Russwood Park featuring Wicks versus Monroe. Iron Mike Dibiase, the adoptive father of 1980s star Ted Dibiase, was advertised to defend the Junior Heavyweight Championship against Galento that night, but did not appear. Monroe defeated Wicks that night in front of 10,157 fans in a 2 out of 3 falls event with interference from Treacherous (Treach) Phillips, an intimidating grappler that had a menacing snake tattooed onto his left forearm. Wicks bled heavily in the match, setting up grudge matches against Phillips and Monroe.

After the huge card featuring Monroe versus Wicks at Russwood Park with Marciano officiating, the Tennessee title was held up. Wicks was phased out for awhile and Monroe faced Al “Spider” Galento at another card in Russwood Park on 14 September. That event drew over 7,000 fans. The promotion was back at Russwood Park the next week for another Wicks/Monroe title match, which Monroe won. No attendance was announced for that match. Wicks had a few more main events in 1959, but as the year went on, he moved lower on the card in Memphis. He received one more run with the Gulf Coast title in late 1959.

In 1960 Wicks rotated through different positions on the cards. Sometimes he worked the main events, either in tag teams or in single matches against Monroe. Some nights he was in the opening match, and other Monday

nights he wasn’t working in Memphis. By late 1960, he had phased out of being a full time wrestler and moved into a position with the Memphis police department. Wicks continued to wrestle in the Memphis area, working the weekly shows in Blytheville, Arkansas and some Memphis cards for several years both in the mid 1960s and the early 1970s. In 1965, he teamed with Len Rossi to take on a Japanese tag team comprised of Hiro Matsuda and Konji Inoki. Inoki would later change his name to Antonio Inoki and become one of the biggest legends in Japanese wrestling. However, Wicks truly ended his full time career in 1960. It is rare in the wrestling business that someone is so easily and willingly able to step away from the television cameras and hearing the reactions from an enthralled crowd. It may be that the love for legitimate athletic competition made it easier for Wicks to move away from professional wrestling’s scripted theatrics as a primary career. After retiring from the Shelby County Sheriff’s Department, Wicks moved to Asheville, North Carolina, and continues to train wrestlers in hooking techniques, now used extensively in mixed martial arts (MMA) contests.

After the death of Monroe, Wicks was interviewed by Steven Johnson and Greg Oliver of *Slam! Wrestling* and recalled his last ring encounter with Sputnik from July of 2005. "We got in the ring close and I said, 'I'm going to bust your glasses.' He was wearing glasses," Wicks said with a laugh. "He said, 'Oh, goddamnit, Wicks, I'll be blind. I can't see. I'll bleed to death.’”

Jackie Fargo

"*Often imitated, never duplicated."*
"Let me tell you something, pally."
"What fun I had in the wrestling business and I made a living doing it."
The gravelly voice. The blonde hair. The Fargo strut, which was undoubtedly replicated across a thousand playgrounds, always signifying who was the coolest and smartest person in the crowd. After Elvis was shipped to the Army and before Jerry "The King" Lawler came onto the scene, there was one man that embodied the concept of rock star charisma in Memphis, Tennessee. He entered the world with the name of Henry Faggart, but he will forever be known as The Fabulous One, Jackie Fargo. Jackie started in the grappling game in North Carolina, with encouragement from grappler Johnny Long, working for a small company that was running competition to the established Jim Crockett promotion. Jackie received $7.00 per week when he broke into the business. Early monikers included Dick Bishop and Honey Boy Dickie Bishop. He hit the road as a teenager; wrestling results from 1946 show that he worked several cards in Kalispell, Montana. During 1952, while a young man named Fidel Castro was quietly running for Congress, Fargo worked in Cuba for $250 per week, a very generous sum of money during that timeframe. Fargo's career was interrupted in the 1950s with a two year stint in the Army. In 1956, Jackie was working in West Virginia and got booked in the Amarillo territory, but Toots Mondt convinced him to go to New York. Working for Vince McMahon, Sr., he started a successful singles feud with Karl Von Hess (Frank Faketty), including an angle where Fargo found a cigar and used Hess's pseudo-German face for an ashtray. At the same time, another young man, whose real name was Don Kalt entered the territory. Fargo and Kalt were in an unspoken competition to determine who could be more outrageous. Fargo recalled in the movie *Memphis Heat,* "I was as meaner than a damn rattlesnake and as tough as a two dollar steak."
There have been few more entertaining characters in professional wrestling history than Don Kalt. Kalt spent his youth in the aptly named Hell's Kitchen neighborhood in Manhattan, New York. He later moved to Pittsburgh and became a bodybuilder, at one point winning the "Mr. Pittsburgh" contest. He received an invitation to attend a wrestling school under promoter Al Taft in Columbus, Ohio. "Nature Boy" Buddy Rogers

(Herman Rohde) took a liking to the young man and he started in the business as a tag team partner of a teenage Ray Stevens. Stevens would go on to be one of the best wrestlers in the business during the 1960s and 1970s, and was part of two legendary tag teams, one with Pat Patterson and one with Nick Bockwinkel.

Don had worked in Florida and North Carolina before making his way to New York's Capital Sports promotion (which eventually evolved into the WWWF, then the WWF, and is now the WWE). Jackie and Don Fargo were put together as a tag team, after promoter Toots Mondt (former wrestler Joseph Mondt who formed "Capital Sports" with Vince McMahon, Sr.) determined that their unabashed pompousness could be displayed more effectively as a team than as single wresters. Bobby Davis served as the team's manager. While their appearance would not be shocking in the modern era, during the time when the acceptable fashion trends for young men dictated crew cuts and plain white t-shirts, the Fargos stood out. Strikingly.

Jackie and Don Fargo had bleached blonde hair and sported several tattoos. Sometimes they wore pink shoes, sometimes red shoes accompanied their purple suits or sequined outfits. Black top hats were a frequent fashion accessory. The fans in New York loved to hate the cocky young duo. Jackie would later state, "We could wrestle the devil and we would have been the heels." The team was originally named the Fargo Brothers. One night, with a particularly energized crowd and after an elaborate entrance, the ring announcer introduced the team as "The Fabulous Fargos." The name stuck. Many grapplers throughout the years had unnaturally blonde hair, for the most practical of reasons. For fans in the cheap seats, when a wrestling bled, the blonde hair provided a more dramatic canvas than a darker color. The men were occasionally referred to as "suicide blondes." They dyed by their own hands.

In March of 1957, the Fargos headlined Madison Square Garden against the high flying Antonino Rocca and Miguel Perez. There were over 20,000 fans at the sold out event with a gate of $62,000. Jackie and Don were both paid $3,500 for their work that evening. According to the 1957 census date, the annual median income for working men during that year was $3,700. By May of that year, the Fargos had made their initial run in the Tennessee territory, winning that territories version of the World Tag Team titles from Corsica Jean and Corsica Joe (Jean Louis Roy and Francois Miquet). They

also had a series of matches in Memphis against Buddy Rogers, who teamed with either Billy Darnell or Country Boy Calhoun, later known as Haystacks Calhoun. The Fargos came into Tennessee as arrogant heels with the storyline that they were going to take the tag titles back to New York, where the sophisticated city people knew how to appreciate fine tag teams. In retrospect, it's almost impossible to imagine Jackie or Don Fargo talking with what Don described as "Yankee accents." A November 1957 card featuring the Fargos in Memphis noted it was the duo's first appearance since they "got into a riot three months ago."

The Fargos continued as a touring team in the late 1950s until early 1960, working in Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, Illinois (with Fred Koehler's Chicago promotion), and Indiana. During this timeframe, the Fargos entered into a booking arrangement with Jack Pfefer (whose name was also commonly spelled "Pfeffer"). The perpetually disheveled Pfefer was one of the fantastic characters in professional wrestling, who started working as a booking agent in the 1920s. In the 1930s, after a series of business disputes between the major power players in wrestling resulted in a new coalition that did not include Pfefer, he went to the *New York Daily Mirror* and exposed the inner workings of the business. He was known for loving the theatrical nature of wrestling and is credited for popularizing the use of female and midget performers.

Pfefer would often work against the established wresting promotions, billing wrestlers with names that sounded like the stars of the era. A Boston program featuring "Wildman" Jackie Fargo from 1965 lists Fargo as the *National Wrestling Alliance* (NWA) World's Champion (a title he never held) and trumpets that he is "The Only Holder of Two World Titles and Two Diamond Belts." Other wrestlers on the card include Ted Blassie (who was not, of course, Fred Blassie), Bruno Sanmartino (not Sammartino), and Lou Khesz (not Thesz). After representing Buddy Rogers from 1946 to 1960, Pfefer was particular irate when that business partnership ended, and often had a "Bummy Rogers" on his cards. Future N.W.A. World Champion Ron Garvin worked a feminine variation of the theme, appearing as "Gigi Rogers" early in his career.

In 1960, Jackie started teaming with his real life younger brother Sonny Fargo (whose real name was Jack Faggart) in the Carolinas and New York. The pair worked Madison Square Garden on several occasions during that year and also worked in North Carolina and Virginia. Sonny would

eventually evolve into the Roughhouse Fargo character, one of the most unique special attractions in the Tennessee territory.

Throughout the 1960s, 1970s and even the early 1980s, Roughhouse would spend a few weeks in the territory at a time. The storyline was generally that Jackie had been doubled team by two heels and needed a partner to extract revenge. When Jackie stated, “You’ve really done it now, I’m calling in Roughhouse,” the fans were primed for some lunatic action. Sonny had no physique whatsoever and his primary role in wrestling eventually was serving as a referee in the North Carolina territory. Lance Russell later recalled, “We could always be assured there’d be a lot of folks in the arena to see Roughhouse.” Jerry Jarrett noted, “Most of the fans in our area really thought he was nuts.”

The gimmick was that Roughhouse would be called in from his regular job at the mental institution. The heels would proclaim that the crazy Fargo brother did not work at the loony bin, but was kept there as a patient and would refer to him as “Nuthouse.” The Roughhouse routine included not only attacking the heel wrestlers, but also hitting Jackie when he would try to hold him back or giving the referee a nice shot when rule enforcement tried to come into play. After terrorizing everyone in the ring, Roughhouse would grab some popcorn or hot dog from a fan, enjoy a bite, and sit down on the lap of a lady in the front row beaming with a goofy smile. He might slap a heel with a chair and then plop down in it and place his feet on the ring apron, relaxing like he was at a Sunday dinner. Many a terrorizing heel was reduced to running away from squirting ketchup or being spanked with a shoe when Roughhouse came to town, always to the delight of the fans. In many ways Sonny’s character, a short man with no physique doing wild brawling and broad comedy, represented what people loved, or hated, the most about Tennessee wrestling. Sonny passed away on 20 August, 2008.

When a concept works in wrestling, or any other part of the entertainment industry, one can rest assured that the idea will be repeated. The Memphis territory was filled with Fargos during 1961. Early in the year, Don Fargo (who was no longer regularly teaming with Jackie) was in the area. Jackie was there for several months and when he left, Sonny arrived. Later that year, another Fargo was invented as Louie Tillet was billed as Joe Fargo. In September, the hated Jackie Fargo saved Len Rossi who was being attacked by The Masked Devils, Mephisto and Dante (wrestlers Louis Papineau and Red Donovan, who would later work in the Von Brauners). From that time

forward, he became the lead babyface in the area. Decades later, Fargo told Steven Johnson, “I was the person people loved to hate, but they loved me. As much as they hated me, they loved that Fargo strut. Boy, they’d boo the heel out of me, but they loved that.”

Don Fargo became a wrestling gypsy working throughout country under a variety of different names. He changed his name to Jack Dalton and teamed with Jim Dalton (whose real name was Jim Baugus, sometimes spelled “Baggis”), working primarily in Texas in the early 1960s. In 1964, he returned to Tennessee reuniting with Jackie and winning the Southern Tag Team title. He also took the NWA Georgia Heavyweight title from Sputnik Monroe in Georgia during that year. He then went to the Gulf Coast area using the Jack Dalton persona and teamed with Frank Dalton (Gene Stevens).

In 1969, Don Fargo found a new identity, working in Dick the Bruiser’s Indianapolis based World Wrestling Association. Fargo wrestled as Jack Dillinger and teamed with Kenny Mack, who worked as Frank Dillinger. The duo was known as “The Chain Gang” and reportedly earned the ire of some real life bikers with their gimmick. At a bar in Wisconsin, a fight occurred over this gimmick infringement. Don Fargo escaped after swimming across a nearby lake. Kenny Mack was shot in the leg, ending his wrestling career. He was replaced by Chris Harris (who would later gain more fame as Chris Colt), using the name Jim Dillinger. (Colt was an openly gay wrestler who worked in Tennessee in 1975 and had a run in Alabama in 1986 working under the alias Chris Von Colt, a Nazi gimmick. He later worked in the gay adult film industry and it is believed that he contracted AIDS and passed away in a Washington state mission in the mid-1990s.)

Don went back to the Gulf Coast territory in 1971 and had an extended feud with “Cowboy” Bob Kelly. The storyline included suspensions of both men with Fargo returning under a mask as “Mr. D.” The two men bled all over the territory, fighting for the “Brass Knuckles” title. As the feud was ending in 1972, a “Loser Leaves Town” match was scheduled. Don Fargo could not work the blow off match to the feud due to a broken leg or, another version of events, just skipped town and took the promotion’s belt with him. He was replaced in the feud by his long lost “brother,” Jackie Fargo. Jackie also brought another young wrestler in the territory for this short run, Jerry

Lawler. In 1973, Sonny Fargo came to Gulf Coast to continue the Fargo/Kelly feud.

During this Gulf Coast run, another Fargo had been added to the family tree. Don had started working with Johnny Fargo and the two would team up in 1972 and 1973 in Buffalo. Johnny Fargo, the son of Johnny Valentine (John Wisniski) later gained greater fame as Greg "The Hammer" Valentine. In 1975, Don was back in the Gulf Coast circuit and worked an "X-rated" match against Nick Kozak. The match was advertised to the public with the stipulation "no cameras allowed" and would end when a man was stripped to his underwear. "He told me to pull his tights down," Kozak remembered later. "He was naked as a jaybird. You should have seen the flashbulbs going off even though cameras were supposed to be barred. I thought Lee Fields [the promoter] was going to have a heart attack."

Speaking of nudity, clothing always seemed to be optional for the Fargos. The duo was known to hitchhike naked and to pop out of car trunks in birthday suit attire. One running joke was for a Fargo to put a toothbrush or cigar where the sun didn't shine and walk around the dressing room, looking for the missing object. Jackie reportedly grossed out Tojo Yamamoto with this routine for decades.

Getting back into our wresting tights, Don Fargo worked for both Nick Gulas and Jerry Jarrett in the late 1970s, after Jarrett established a separate promotion. In 1986, he was used as a jobber/enhancement talent for the national AWA tapings on ESPN, losing matches to Jimmy Snuka and Curt Henning. While he still looked credible in the ring, displaying a prominent swastika tattoo was a bit unnerving.

As the 1960s progressed, Jackie Fargo did less traveling and became a major cornerstone of the Tennessee promotion. He teamed with a variety of partners including Lester Welch, Mario Milano (Mario Bulfone), Johnny Walker (who would later become Mr. Wresting II), Len Rossi (Len Rositano), Rocky Smith (Jimmy Smith), and Herb Welch. Some of his major feuds were against the Von Brauners, The Medics (Donald Lortie and Tony Gonzales), Tojo Yamamoto teaming with Al Perez or Tor Kamata (McRonald Kamaka), the Blue Infernos (Frank Martinez and Gilberto "Gypsy Joe" Melendez), and Don Carson (Donald Gaston) tagging with the Red Shadow (Richard Demonbreun, better known as Dick Dunn). Jackie was out of wrestling for several months in 1968 and 1969. He made appearances in the local news for having a domestic dispute with his wife.

Additionally, Jackie had started a business with country singer Eddie Bond and Eddie filed assault and battery charges against Fargo.
It was during this timeframe that Jerry Jarrett had started working as a promoter on the Memphis side of the territory. Jerry went to see Jackie and asked him to return to the business. Nick Gulas thought this was a mistake, concerned that Fargo was drinking too much and had become unreliable. Jackie startled Jarrett at their initial meeting by asking Jarrett if he was a homosexual and making fun of the way he carried his briefcase. Their business relationship survived that bit of teasing and Jackie was teaming with Roughhouse working against Tojo Yamamoto and Johnny Long by the summer of 1969.
For the next few years, Fargo would again rotate partners teaming with Dennis Hall, Jerry Jarrett and Tojo Yamamoto to take on teams such as the Spoilers, the Interns, and the Fabulous Kangaroos (Al Costello and Don Kent). The Interns had a rather comical gimmick, wearing medical scrubs to the ring while their “evil” manager Dr. Ramey used rags supposedly soaked in ether to render opponents unconscious. However, they drew serious heat working in territories throughout the country and were a big money tag team.
In September of 1971, Fargo ventured out of Memphis, teaming with Jarrett against Sonny King and, his former Fargo brother, Louie Tillet in Miami Beach, Florida. This short trip was most likely a working vacation. In 1973, Fargo found himself back in court. In a bizarre incident, aging wrestler Mario Galento (Butch Boyette), working without a script, tried to attack Jerry Jarrett and Jerry Lawler while they were having a televised match. Later, Lawler was also reportedly blindsided in a match by Galento in a spot show in Batesville, Mississippi. The motive for these attacks has never been ascertained, although there have been whispers in the wrestling community that Galento was roughed up by some Gulas wrestlers after working for a competing promoter. After these events, Galento went to the police stating that Fargo had called him and threatened to kill him. The judge ordered the two men to stay away from each other and have no communication.
In 1974, Fargo would take a young man that had once idolized him and turn him into “The King.” Jerry Jarrett later reflected, “Jackie Fargo was the veteran superstar going against the cocky new superstar in Jerry Lawler. There was a natural underlying heat between the two men because the

situation was real. There is always a bit of jealousy between the outgoing star and the new star that is trying to take his place. Lawler and Fargo were always civil to each other and most of the time were sincerely friends. However, we all also knew of the underlying heat. I simply wrote the story line to match reality and it was box office magic." Magic it was. In Memphis, for four successive weeks in June and July, the attendance was 11, 542; 11,783; 11,407; and 10,535 (they drew over 45,000 fans over a four week period of time. Amazing). At the end of the feud, Fargo had generously passed the torch as being the top man in the promotion to Lawler.

For the next few years, Fargo was used mainly as a special attraction in Memphis. In September of 1976, a main event between Fargo and Lawler "with no referee" drew 10,938 fans. In December of that year, Fargo teamed with Rocky Johnson in a main event to take on Lawler and the Mongolian Stomper, drawing almost 9,000 fans. The fans had a real love for Fargo and he could always pop the territory when used on a limited basis.

After the Jarrett split from Gulas in 1977, Jarrett was surprised when Fargo and Tojo Yamamoto stayed with Gulas. In fact, Fargo informed Gulas of Jarrett's plan to start his own territory. While Gulas was not known for being a good payoff man, the reality is that Tojo and Fargo probably received more bookings and a bigger push under Gulas than they would have under Jarrett. Both men had been in Memphis for an exceptionally long time and had been bypassed by Jerry Lawler and Bill Dundee for the top slots in the promotion. Fargo feuded with The Sheik (Ed Farhat), The Executioner (Curtis Smith), and the Zebra Kid (Jim Curtis) in 1978. On 2 May, The Sheik and Fargo wrestled in front of only 1,474 fans in Memphis, where Gulas could not compete with Jarrett's promotion. Roughhouse was brought in and the duo feuded with Crazy Luke Graham (James Johnson) and King Ripper Collins (Roy Lee Collins).

In 1979, Fargo worked with two up and coming young men that would become two of the biggest stars in the history of the business, wrestling against Randy Savage in Nashville and returning to work for Jarrett, teaming with The Hulk (Hulk Hogan) to take on Ron Bass and Sonny King. Fargo also brought back "the Tennessee funny match" in teaming with Dundee and Lawler against the Blonde Bombers (Larry Latham, Wayne Farris, and Danny Davis), delighting the crowd while he infuriated the heels with a series of comedy spots. Fargo "retired" in 1980, in a televised

ceremony that featured the first on camera appearance of young photographer Jim Cornette. However, “The Fabulous One” did spend some time working on the Gulas circuit in 1980 with yet another Fargo, his “nephew” Randy Fargo (Randy Curtis).

In April of 1982, Fargo demonstrated that still had drawing power in Memphis. He teamed with Lawler to face The Monk and The Dream Machine (Troy Graham) in an event that over 9,000 fans attended. (The Monk was Steve Miller - not the pop singer, but a former Texas Golden Gloves boxer, who had gained notoriety for crying during his boxing matches. In wrestling, he portrayed another emotion during interview segments; he seemed to grow increasingly constipated as he tried to portray intensity. Sometimes the best comedy is unintentional).

During October of 1982, Jackie introduced the Fabulous Ones, Steve Keirn and Stan Lane, to the Memphis wrestling audience. The tag team duo replicated the tuxedos and top hats style that Don and Jackie had used decades before. Fargo got back into the ring with the Fabs, in a manically wild brawl against The Moondogs. Jackie popped the territory again on 13 August, 1984, teaming with Steve Keirn to draw over 9,000 fans, defeating Nightmare #1 (Danny Davis) and King Kong Bundy in a main event.

In 1986, Fargo teamed with Jerry and Jeff Jarrett to take on Tojo Yamamoto, Akio Sato, and Tarzan Goto. Jerry described his thoughts during this time, “I came back so I could have memories in my old age of wrestling with my son Jeff. I also wanted to team with Jeff and Tojo once and Jeff and Fargo once.” On 9 May of 1988, Fargo was brought in to be the referee when Jerry Lawler pinned Curt Henning for the American Wrestling Association World Heavyweight Championship. Fargo was a better wrestler than he was a ref, counting to four instead of to three on the pinfall.

While none of the Fargos would have ever been confused with great technical wrestlers, they were all extremely effective brawlers. Jim Cornette has stated that the wild brawls that Jackie Fargo had, compete with liberal use of tables and chairs, served as the origins of the “hardcore” style of wrestling. Lance Russell stated that Jackie “knew how to read an audience like nobody I have ever known.” Using little more than a collar and elbow tie up, a great punch, the occasional Atomic Drop, and an endless well spring of charisma, Jackie Fargo kept the crowds entertained in Memphis for decades. He was nothing short of fabulous.

Tojo Yamamoto

"Tojo was a different kind of guy. If he liked you, he liked you. If he didn't, he didn't," Bill Dundee.

He was born in Hawaii in 1927. Most sources list his real name is Harold Watanabe, although Jerry Jarrett has stated that his name was Harold Tanabe and Guy Coffey, who was involved in Memphis wrestling from the 1950s until his death in 2011, has referred to him as Larry Inoki. Little is known about his early life. He was in his early teens living in the Aloha State when the Imperial Japanese Navy rained bombs on Pearl Harbor. It was been chimerically rumored that Watanabe worked as a translator for the United States during the war. A much less romantic rumor is that he operated a free taxi service to shuttle servicemen from Pearl Harbor to Waikiki. He later joined the military and developed a background in the martial arts.

It is believed that he started wrestling professionally circa 1953. A listing for the *National Wrestling Alliance's* (NWA) Hawaiian Tag Team Title shows Tojo, then working as P.Y. Chang, winning the belts with Tosh Togo (Harold Sakata). No specific date is given, but from the records it appears to be prior to 1955. Tojo most likely worked for Toshio Yamaguchi's *All Japan Pro Wrestling Association* under the P.Y. Chang moniker in 1955. He is credited with training Kanji "Joe" Higuchi, who debuted as a wrestler in 1954 and later became Japan's best known referee and an important office liaison in working with American wrestlers and promoters for *All Japan Pro Wrestling*.

In the summer of 1961, P.Y. had transitioned from Chang to Chung. Buddy Rogers wrestled P.Y. Chung in a main event in Charlotte in July of 1961. Later that same year, Watanabe/Tanabe/Inoki/Chang/Chung went to Florida with his new ring name, Tojo Yamamoto. The pseudonym was not chosen lightly. Hideki Tojo was the Prime Minister of Japan during World War II. He was convicted of war crimes and executed in 1948. Japanese Naval Marshal General Isoroku Yamamoto was the Commander-in-Chief of the Combined Fleet and developed the plans for the attack on Pearl Harbor. War World II was fresh in the minds of Americans in the 1960s and the stereotype of the "sneaky" nature of the Japanese people was still widely accepted. Decades later, Gorilla Monsoon would regularly refer to a wrestler being "Peal Harbored," when a grappler was blindsided. Gordon

Solie labeled Tojo as “The Asiatic Savage.” Tojo and his tag team partner Taro Myaki (later known as Professor Hiro) were subtly referred to as “The Killer Japs.” The hated duo bested Eddie Graham (Edward Gossett) and Dick Steinborn for the Florida NWA U.S. Tag Team belts in November of 1961. In an interesting Cold War era contest, Yamamoto and Myaki wrestled The Russian Wolfmen in Jacksonville in 1962 (the Wolfmen would later shed their Soviet personas and become known as “brothers” John and Al Smith). It is unknown whether the Florida audience hated Russians or the Japanese more during the Kennedy administration.
Wrestling results from April of 1962 show Tojo and Myaki had moved their feud with Eddie Graham and Dick Steinborn (who was sometimes replaced by Ray Villmer) to Georgia. The “Japanese” team was bested by Graham and his different partners in main event matches, promoted as either Texas Death Matches or Judo Jacket Matches. Later in 1962, Tojo was back in North Carolina under the name P.Y. Chung teaming with Myaki facing the team of Antonino Rocco and George Becker in July.
In July of 1963, Tojo debuted in Memphis. He teamed with Hiro Matsuda (Yasuhiro Kojima) in September and later teamed with Ivan Malenkov, working a lengthy program against Tex Riley and Len Rossi. In December of 1963, Yamamoto/Malenkov beat Jackie Fargo and Mario Milano for the Southern Tag Team titles. Memphis was a tag team territory and there were plenty of tag team titles throughout the years in Tennessee. In addition to the Southern Tag Team titles, Tojo, with various partners throughout his career, also held the Mid America Tag Team titles, the World Tag Team title, the United States Tag Team titles, and the World Six Man titles. In all, he was a tag team champion on over 55 occasions. He held a singles title, the Southern Junior Heavyweight title (later known as the Southern Heavyweight title), once.
It is somewhat jarring to see pictures of Tojo from the early 1960s, with short cropped dark hair, arched/black eyebrows, and a Fu Manchu mustache/beard. He looked much more powerful than in a later era, when his rotund belly and his barely above 5 feet height approached equal dimensions. Tojo developed a theatrical pre-match ritual. Wearing a ceremonial Japanese robe and wooden shoes, he would do Sumo like preparatory stomps and then toss salt in the air. Of course, sometimes an extra dose of salt would get into an opponent’s eyes after the match started.

And bashing an adversary's skull with a wooden shoe was not off limits either.

During the mid-1960s, Tojo was a fixture on the Memphis tag team scene. His partners included Alex Perez, Mitsu Hirai, Tor Kamata, Chin Lee (Claude Johnson), Treach Phillips (Henry Phillips), the Great Higami (Tsutao Higami), Tamaya Soto, and Professor Ito (Umanosuke Ueda). Foes included Karl/Skull Von Stroheim (Walter Nurnberg), Kurt Von Stroheim (Willi Rutkowsky), Jackie and Sonny (Roughhouse) Fargo, Jackie and Don Fargo, the Von Brauners, Lee and Bobby Fields, Buddy Fuller and Herb Welch, Corsica Jean and Corsica Joe, Mario Milano and Len Rossi. In January of 1966, Tojo faced future NWA World Heavyweight Champion Jack Brisco in Memphis. In July of that year, Tojo took a victory in a 2 out of 3 falls match from Jackie Fargo after throwing salt in Fargo's eyes. Afterwards, according to Nashville newspaper reports, "Fargo and a host of fans then chased Yamamoto to the dressing room." That must have been quite the sight.

In 1967, Tojo ventured out of Memphis. In March of that year, Tojo worked a mid-card match in Dallas against Alberto Torres. He then went back to the Carolinas for several months, using the P.Y. Chung moniker. A card from June of 1967 shows Tojo (as Chung) teaming with Haru Sasaki in a main event match against Carolina mainstays George Becker and Johnny Weaver. By late 1967, Yamamoto was in the Amarillo territory, owned by Dory Funk, Sr. This tour led to another name change as he was billed as T.Y. Chung (T.Y. as in Tojo Yamamoto). He feuded with Terry Funk and Ricky Romero (Henry Romero) during this run. He may have also wrestled against Memphis legend Sputnik Monroe, who was also in Amarillo during this timeframe.

Tojo returned to Tennessee in March of 1968 and started an alliance with manager "Gentleman" Saul Weingeroff that would last for over a year. Tojo teamed with Sugi Sito (Francisco Fernandez) for several months and then formed a highly successful team with Johnny Long. Weingeroff was known for hitting babyfaces with a cane to win matches and was one of the first managers to master the fireball. He was established as one of the most hated managers in the business after working for years with the Von Brauners. Yamamoto and Long won six tag team titles in 1968 and 1969, defeating Johnny Walker and Len Rossi, Dennis Hall and Les Thatcher (Leslie Malady), Len Rossi and Don Carson, Johnny Walker and Ken Lucas, Bob

Ramstead and Johnny Walker, and the Sundown Kid and Johnny Walker. They also feuded with Joe and Bill Sky (Bill Bowman and Joe Turner), who would later work as the Interns in the Gulf Coast territory.

Since the name Johnny Walker popped up four times in the preceding paragraph, now is a good time for a sidebar. When Jerry Jarrett started booking in Atlanta, he tried to get Tim Woods (George "Tim" Woodin, also known as "Mr. Wrestling") to join the territory. When Tim Woods declined, Jarrett put the hood on Johnny Walker, creating Mr. Wrestling II. Walker, who had been in the mat game since 1956, became the biggest star in Georgia during the mid-70s using the Mr. Wrestling "Number Two" gimmick. Lillian Carter, the mother of Jimmy Carter, was a huge wrestling fan and Walker received an invitation to visit the White House during the Carter administration. When the Secret Service told Walker that he would have to remove his mask as part of the proceedings, he politely declined the offer. Protecting one's gimmick was pretty important in those days.

In the fall of 1969, Tojo legitimately broke his arm and was out of action for several months. Saul Weingeroff transitioned to managing The Spoilers (Lorenzo Parente and Joey Carea) and in the storyline, the Spoilers were responsible for Tojo's injury. Not many people could have pulled off this trick, but Weingeroff turned Tojo into a babyface. One of the hallmarks of Memphis wrestling was interweaving reality into the storylines. During 1969, Tojo had been training Jerry Jarrett to be a wrestler. He had a unique training method - Tojo would squeeze Jarrett's ear or finger until the pain almost made him cry. Then he would tell Jarrett to look in the mirror at his facial expression. Tojo taught him that one of the key requirements for a wrestler was the ability to show pain, sadness, fear, or anger. Jarrett remarked in 1992, "Tojo could do more with the expressions on his face than most of the wrestlers today can do with their whole match."

During the studio matches in 1970, Jarrett was becoming increasingly competitive, although often still not winning. Lance Russell remarked on his improvement, "I don't know who he is working with, but somebody is helping this guy." After this comment, Jarrett found himself being double teamed (most likely by The Interns). Tojo saved the day and a new headlining unit was formed. The odd couple tag team had a package that worked for the Memphis fans. Jarrett was the scientific babyface, who specialized in appealing to the female fans, getting sympathy by selling the offense of larger heels. Tojo was the ferocious pit bull, always ready to chop

an opponent into tiny pieces. Tojo and Jarrett spent a significant portion of the next year in main events, often against The Interns or Don and Al Greene.

Over the next few years, Tojo worked as a babyface, almost always in tag team situations. Partners included Robert Fuller (Robert Welch), Big Bill Dromo, Tommy Gilbert, Jackie Fargo, and Johnny Marlin (Roy Boyd). Opponents included the Interns, Bobby Hart and Lorenzo Parento, Jerry Lawler and Jim White, Don Kent and Al Costello (The Fabulous Kangaroos), and Ron and Terry Garvin. (Note, The Interns that worked in Memphis in 1970 were Jim Starr and Billy Garrett. When The Interns returned in 1971, the masked duo was Jim Starr and Tom Andrews. Roger Smith and Don Bass worked as The Interns in Memphis in the 1980s).

Tojo was involved in a 1973 backstage incident in Nashville with veteran wrestler “Dandy” Jack Donovan (Jack Dunnavant) that insiders have speculated about for years. According to Jerry Jarrett, Tojo was furious with Donovan for being unprofessional with him in the ring. In this version of events, Tojo retaliated by himself and gave Donovan a severe beating. Others that are aware of the incident claim that Donovan had upset promoter Nick Gulas. In the second version of the story, Jarrett, Jackie Fargo, and Tojo were all involved in the incident, and Tojo beat Jack severely with a wooden shoe. Donovan was reportedly hospitalized after the episode.

In early 1974, Tojo turned heel again, giving Jerry Jarrett a severe (worked) beating in the process. This treacherous deceit led to a “Grudge Match” against an outraged Jackie Fargo in early March. Three weeks later, the stakes were higher, as Tojo faced Jarrett in a bout hyped as “The Grudge Match of the Century.” Of course, in the world of professional wrestling, forgiveness can come pretty quickly. By the summer, Tojo would be once again a babyface, teaming with Jackie Fargo. In August of that year, Tojo teamed up with Fargo and later Jarrett in Memphis to face Al Greene and Phil Hickerson. On the Nashville side of the territory, he tagged with George Gulas to face Don Kent (Leo “Joe” Smith, Jr.) and Chris Gallagher (a young Dutch Mantell).

In early 1975, Tojo teamed with Eddie Marlin to take on George Barnes and Bill Dundee in a main event that drew over 10,000 fans. Tojo spent much of 1975 working on the Nashville end of the territory with Tommy Rich, which included a headline feud with Otto Von Heller (who also worked in

different territories as “Mike Hall”) and Karl Von Steiger (Lorne Corlett). In 1976, Tojo worked a few main events in Memphis, teaming with Dundee against Lawler and Professor Tanaka in January; in September he teamed with Dundee and Rocky Johnson against Phil Hickerson, Dennis Condrey (generally spelled “Condry” in Memphis), and Lawler.

Tojo had not worked in Memphis for several months preceding the Jarrett/Gulas split in 1977. In reality, younger, more athletic stars were working Memphis and it had become the most profitable city in the company. Tojo certainly received more steady work by staying with Gulas after the split. He worked on several Nick Gulas cards in Memphis from March until May of 1977. Generally, he teamed with George Gulas. Due to steadily decreasing attendance, George stopped promoting in Memphis in May of 1977. In 1977, Tojo worked a few main events for Gulas, including a match against Abdullah the Butcher in October, but was often put in a mid-card or semifinal slot.

In 1978, Tojo popped the Gulas territory when he turned heel on George Gulas. Tojo began teaming with veteran Gypsy Joe (Gilberto Melendez) as the “No Pain Train.” The heel duo defeated Dutch Mantell and Ken Lucas for the Mid American Tag Team titles in September of that year and often defended them against “The Jet Set,” Bobby Eaton and George Gulas. Eaton had started working as part of the ring crew in Huntsville, Alabama as a teenager and would become one of the best wrestlers of the 1980s. ‘

In 1979, Tojo teamed with Chris Colt, the Great Togo (Tetsuo Sekigawa, who worked in other territories as “Mr. Pogo”), David Schultz, and Bobby Eaton in the Gulas territory. He remained in the heel faction until the territory closed in the summer of 1980. In November of 1979, Tojo worked his first dates for Jarrett since the split, having a short (no pun intended) program with Ricky Morton. Tojo went back to Jarrett full time after Gulas went out of business and even teamed with Jerry Jarrett to win the Championship Wrestling Association (CWA) “World” Tag Team titles in July of 1980. Tojo was still pushed as a legitimate top attraction, teaming with Jarrett against the Blonde Bombers and Austin Idol/Dutch Mantell. In September, he worked a main event teaming with Bill Dundee against his “No Pain Train” partner Gypsy Joe and Dr. Bill Irwin. Tojo was also a key player in the angle with Peggy Rich, Tommy Rich’s real life mother, in November of 1980.

For the next few years, Tojo worked primarily as a manager in Memphis. He was part of the 1981 Tupelo concession stand brawl with Fuchi and Onita against Rick Morton and Eddie Gilbert. Tojo humorously decided to end the brawl by throwing chops at the concession stand owner/local promoter Herman Sheffield and his wife. In 1983, Tojo teamed up with Gypsy Joe again to work several cards for Angelo Poffo's ICW promotion. Two wrestlers also working on the ICW cards were Bart Batten and Johnny Wilhoit, who Tojo would manage in Memphis in the summer of 1984. The tag team was called "The New Generation" in Memphis and were featured in one of the most unintentionally hysterical music videos ever produced by the promotion (I don't want to comment extensively on the tone of the video, but I bet Jim Barnett loved it). Tojo also teamed with his former protégé Tommy Rich to take on The Dirty White Boys (Tony Anthony and Len Denton) in 1984 and worked in opening matches for several months. In 1985, Tojo and Jarrett tried to recreate some of the magic they had created a decade and a half before. Their opponents in 1985 included Norvell Austin teaming with future WWE Hall of Fame member Koko Ware and Man Mountain Link (Rick Link) teaming with Jerry Bryant.

In 1986, Tojo was paired with the Japanese tag team of Tarzan Goto (Seiji Goto) and Akio Sato, which featured some savage work by the aging manager. The duo hung Jeff Jarrett over the ring ropes in the studio and Tojo wailed on Jarrett repeatedly with both a belt and a kendo stick. (Kendo sticks made great smack/thwack/crack sound effects). He later threatened Lance Russell, which led to an exchange where Lance cut a promo on Tojo calling him "trash" and defending himself with a hammer. This run gave Tojo his last main events in Memphis as he teamed with Goto/Sato against Lawler/Jeff Jarrett/Jerry Jarrett. He also worked a main event in a 10 man tag match with Goto/Sato/Don Bass/Dirty Rhodes against Lawler/Idol/Rich/Jeff Jarrett/Jerry Jarrett.

Tojo continued to work as a manager and a wrestler until 1991. He was part of the crew that worked in Dallas for Jarrett, managing Phil Hickerson, who used the name P.Y. Chu Hi. Note the similarity to Tojo's former name of P.Y. Chung. In Phil's case, the "Hi" stood for Hickerson. The two were involved in an entertaining feud in Dallas with Chris Adams and his wife Toni Adams in 1989.

Tojo trained a significant number of wrestlers during his career. Some of the better known names include Sid Eudy (Sid Vicious/Psycho/Sycho Sid),

Tracy Smothers, Bobby Eaton, Bill Smithson (Moondog Spike), Johnny Rich (a cousin of Tommy Rich, whose real name is Rod Wilsford - he worked as “Roy Rogers” in Memphis in the early 1980s), and Reno Riggins. Bobby Eaton, who broke into the business as a teenager, said that Tojo helped him both inside and outside the ring and “was like a father to me.” Reno Riggins reportedly got a position in the *World Wrestling Federation* by dropping Tojo’s name as his trainer. According to Reno, Tojo made the training difficult, stating to Kenai Andrews, “He liked to run people off.” Younger wrestlers were often booked against Tojo to see if they could withstand his brutal onslaught of chops. Surviving was a badge of honor, complaining was a ticket out of the business.

Tojo worked in an era before hurricanranas and moonsaults. He used a simple arsenal of offensive maneuvers and was an expert at wrestling psychology, often projecting an air of sneering, scowling disgust. He was a solid and sometimes excellent interview with his perpetual broken English and colorful insults (tossing around descriptions such as “Septic tank,” “Pekingese dog,” “Big Palooka,” “Retard”). He could work a crowd into a frenzy with a well timed “sneaky” move or when digging into his arsenal of (ahem) foreign objects. According to Bill Dundee, at one point Tojo had so much heat, he was actually turned away from a Nashville brothel.

Outside of the ring, Tojo battled health concerns during the last few years of his life including diabetes and kidney issues. At one point he worked in a restaurant with George Gulas in Nashville (Tojo was an excellent cook and made a highly regarded pepper steak and rice dish). He also worked at an arcade late in life. He married on two occasions, but had no children. The man known as Tojo Yamamoto committed suicide in February of 1992. Bonzai.

The Von Brauners

"I always loved them because everything was so real. They were real heels," Jimmy Hart quoted in Greg Oliver and Steven Johnson's indispensable book "The Pro Wrestling Hall of Fame: The Tag Teams."

Professional wrestling has never been above exploiting xenophobia, or much of anything else, for money. During the 1950s, many American wrestlers found that by adopting a German persona, with the memory of Adolf Hitler and World War II still prominent in the American psyche, it was much easier to generate heat from fans than by being, say, a farm boy from Nebraska. Karl Von Hess (Frank Faketty), Hans Schmidt (Guy Larose), and Fritz Von Erich (Jack Adkisson) were all from the United States or Canada, but transformed into German wrestlers for boos and profit.

Doug Donnan was a Canadian grappler who broke into wrestling under the name of Doug Donovan. During the 1950s, he worked in the Pacific Northwest, Texas, the Carolinas, and in New Mexico. At times, he worked in a tag team with his brother, Red Donovan. The brothers worked under the names of Doug and Red Donovan in Memphis during March and April of 1959. James (Jimmy) Brawner was a bodybuilder that broke into wrestling in the 1950s. In 1957 and 1958, he worked in Texas as Hans Rommel, known as "the bad German who was banned from wrestling in Europe and some parts of the United States for extreme viciousness."

Wrestler Dick Steinborn had noticed the similarity of Donovan and Brawner while seeing them perform in different territories. In January of 1960, the two were teamed in Nashville under the names Karl Von Brauner (Doug Donovan) and Kurt Von Brauner (Jimmy Brawner). The concept was not new. During the 1950s, a team comprised of Kurt and Fritz Von Brawner (note different spelling) were tag team champions in Georgia. The Georgia Kurt Von Brawner was portrayed by Jack Wilson. It is not known who worked as Fritz.

The Tennessee Von Brauner duo was paired with manager "Gentleman" Saul Weingeroff, who was legitimately of Jewish heritage. The three men became one of the most hated acts in the business. Longtime wrestler Cowboy Bob Kelly reminisced to Greg Oliver in 2004, "My opinion is when they had Saul as a manager they were the best tag team in the world at that time. They got the heat by wrestling, working holds, tagging in and

out a lot. Then they looked so much alike, when Saul would get the referee's attention they could switch. Everything they did was just so smooth."

Saul Weingeroff had worked as a promoter, wrestler, and referee before moving into his most famous role. As a manager, he was known to push the crowds into a frenzy with his anti-American rhetoric during interviews. At ringside, he had a range of tricks, either tripping or clubbing an opponent with the ever present cane, throwing powder, tossing a fireball, or getting physically involved. He often worked in six man tag matches after costing some babyfaces a match against the Von Brauners. Kurt and Karl also kept the heat high by doing illegal switches behind the referee's back. Of course, the ref could not tell which "twin" was the legal man in the ring.

The Von Brauners won their first World Tag Team title belts from Len Rossi and Tex Riley in March of 1960. In May, the Von Brauners debuted in Memphis and feuded with Bobby and Don Fields. They also faced Joe Scarpa who teamed with both Billy Wicks and Lester Welch. Perhaps learning from the Von Brauners the strength of ethnic stereotypes, Scarpa would later gain fame as Chief Jay Strongbow, despite having no Native American heritage.

While early publicity shots show the wrestlers in simple dark suits, the duo would later pose in their wrestling tights while wearing an Iron Cross as part of their gear. The Iron Cross was a retired German military award that Hitler reintroduced in 1939, but modified by adding a swastika to the design. The duo lived the gimmick to the extent that Jimmy Brawner legally changed his name to Kurt Von Brawner and Doug Donovan legally changed his name to Karl Von Brauner. While world domination did not seem feasible, tag team domination did. Gulas sent the Von Brauners on the road extensively in the 1960s, collecting a booking fee for their appearances. From early 1961 to mid 1964, the Von Brauners toured throughout the country, working in the Carolinas, Florida, Georgia, and Texas. They were such a popular act, they would often be booked in multiple territories at the same time. They held the "World Tag Team" titles in every promotion they appeared in during this timeframe. Their introduction in Florida had a significant impact on the course of professional wrestling. Florida announcer "Salty Sol" Fleischman was so legitimately upset that a Jewish person was associated with a Nazi tag team gimmick that he quit the promotion. His replacement was none other than the esteemed Gordon

Solie. Additionally, their feud with Eddie Graham and his various partners is credited with establishing Florida as a profitable territory.

Long time fans recall the team had so much legitimate heat, that they would sometimes be attacked by an overwrought fan. Wrestler Tom Jones once recalled punching Karl in the face at an Indianapolis show, before Jones started working in the business. He followed up the punch by running away as quickly as possible. When the Von Brauners faced other heel tag teams, such as The Mighty Yankees or The Assassins, the crowd invariably cheered for the other team. Fans in Atlanta recall a bloody brawl against the Assassins that ended when Weingeroff busted one of the legendary masked men in the head with his cane. A squad car had to be driven to the ring to get the men safely away from the enraged fans.

Due to the popularity of the act, other German tag teams appeared on the scene. One of these teams worked in Memphis in May of 1963, Skull and Kurt Von Stroheim. Skull was Walter Nurnberg and Kurt was Willi Rutgowsky. Willi would later transition from a Von Stroheim to a Von Brauner.

During the summer of 1964, the Von Brauners came back to Tennessee, feuding with Don and Jackie Fargo at different times during the year in both Memphis and Nashville. They also worked as World Wrestling Association Tag Team Champions in Indianapolis and Chicago during that year. In Nashville, they worked against a broad range of opponents including The Kentuckians (Jake Smith and Luke Brown), Tojo Yamamoto and Alex Perez, and Corsica Joe/Corsica Jean. Kurt Von Brauner also received an NWA title shot against Lou Thesz in Memphis during October of 1964.

The Von Brauners continued to work against Jackie Fargo and various partners as well as the Bobby and Lee Fields in 1965. The Von Brauners also worked in Los Angeles and Indianapolis during April and May. In June of 1965, Jimmy Brawner left the team. While his reasons for leaving the team are unclear, he was known by friends and family as Kurt Von Brawner for the rest of his life. Doug Donovan needed a new partner, which happened to be his old partner. Red Donovan became part of the team, known as Eric Von Brauner (when he first appeared in Nashville he was either listed as “Red” or “Erich”). The new Von Brauners worked a lengthy program with Buddy Fuller and Lester Welch in Memphis in September of that year. In October, Karl received a World Title shot against Lou Thesz.

While the team with Eric did not travel as much as the previous incarnation of the team, they did work in Atlanta during 1965.

The Von Brauners continued to work on the top of the cards in Memphis during 1966 against Fargo and a variety of partners (Haystack Calhoun, Sam Steamboat, Mario Milano, and Roughhouse Fargo) and feuded with Herb Welch and Al Costello. Saul also worked singles programs with Jackie and Roughhouse in Memphis. The team also held the Georgia version of the World Tag Team Title, but would break up in late 1966. Karl Von Brauner would begin a team with Al Costello. Saul Weingeroff temporarily ended his association with the Von Brauners and began managing Tojo Yamamoto and Professor Ito. Eric Von Brauner (Red Donovan) would later work either low on the cards or in small towns in the area, such as Blytheville, Arkansas and Hayti, Missouri.

Al Costello (Giacomo Costa) and Roy Heffernan created what many wrestling historians consider the best tag team of all time with The Fabulous Kangaroos. Roy Heffernan returned to Australia in 1965, but Costello stayed in the United States and created different versions of the Kangaroos with Ray St. Clair and Don Kent. While between Kangaroos, Costello and Karl Von Brauner hopped into the Texas tag team scene as "The Internationals." In additions to capturing the World and American Tag Team Titles while in Texas, they were also involved with a famous angle involving Fritz Von Erich. Jack Adkisson was a football player looking for a spot on a Canadian team when he met Stu Hart in the early 1950s. Jack became Fritz Von Erich working the German heel routine with his "brother" Waldo Von Erich (Walter Paul Sieber). After touring the circuit for several years, Fritz moved back to Texas and became involved in the Dallas promotion (with Ed McLemore) in 1966. Fritz's family did not like the negative attention that came with living in an area where he was the lead heel.

The Internationals (Costello/Von Brauner) were managed by "Playboy" Gary Hart. Hart exposed on television that the Waldo and Fritz Von Erich could never be as good as Karl Von Brauner, because they were not real Germans. Hart revealed that Waldo was a Canadian and that Fritz was actually Jack Adkisson and he had played football at Southern Methodist University. While it was shocking to expose their gimmicks in this way, the fans sided with the Von Erichs in the feud. Hart's propensity for smashing opponents with Costello's boomerang did not assist him in gaining empathy

from the Texas crowds. Eventually, the Von Erichs faced The Internationals in a “Loser Leave Texas” match and by that time, they had transitioned from hated German villains to beloved heroic babyfaces. As for the outcome, Fritz did not leave Texas.

Costello and Von Brauner then went to work for The Sheik in Detroit for several months. By August, “The Internationals” had severed diplomatic relations. Karl went to Florida and teamed with Sputnik Monroe. He was reunited with Saul Weingeroff in Florida. Also working on the cards was the German tag team that had worked in Memphis in 1963, Kurt and Skull Von Stroheim. The time was nearing that Kurt Von Stroheim (Willi Rutgowsky) would become the second Kurt Von Brauner. Willi became known for his sneering, scowling facial expressions and his devastating nerve claw.

In November of 1967, Karl (Doug Donovan), Kurt (Willi Rutgowsky), and Gentleman Saul Weingeroff debuted in the Amarillo territory. Dory Funk, Jr. recalled years later, “When your heels have so much heat you cannot introduce them, you have the kind of heat that draws money. Throughout the Amarillo Territory, the Von Brauners drew capacity crowds.” The Von Brauners worked against Dory Funk, Jr., Terry Funk, Ricky Romero, Nick Bockwinkel, and Gory Guerrero (the father of Chavo, Hector, Mando, and Eddie). The feud with Dory lasted for months, as fans were outraged when Weingeroff split Funk’s head open with his cane. Karl also made a few appearances at the St. Louis Wrestling Club during this run, which lasted until September of 1968.

The team was quiet for the next few years. Kurt teamed with Art Nelson a few times in the Amarillo territory in 1969. In 1971, he was working with the “German” heel he had exposed in Dallas years earlier, Waldo Von Erich. The duo bested Billy Red Lyons and Bill Watts for the NWA United States Tag Team titles in the Oklahoma based Tri-State promotion in March of 1971. In April of 1971, Karl and Kurt Von Brauner (Donovan and Rutgowsky) returned to Tennessee, working against Big Bad John and Omar Atlas in Nashville. In Memphis, they worked against Jarrett/Fargo, Don and Al Greene, and Sputnik Monroe/Norvell Austin. Another team they crossed paths with during this timeframe was The Interns (Jim Starr and Tom Andrews), who had become a main event attraction in Memphis with manager Dr. Ken Ramey. Ramey was not a huge fan of Weingeroff’s sometimes over the top methods, particularly his practice of engaging the

fans at ringside. Ramey commented to wrestling journalist Steven Johnson in 2006, “If you get one old lady or one old man out there and they start arguing with you, people around them are going to start laughing 'cause it's cute, it's funny, and it's a comical thing. Well, you do that and people in the audience, they take their eye off the ring to see what in the world is going on with the manager. Then you're defeating the purpose of what you want to do in the ring."

Although the team was looking much heavier than in younger years by 1972, they stayed at the top of the cards in Memphis, feuding with Jarrett, Yamamoto, and Fargo. Saul even lost his hair to Jackie Fargo in March of 1972. The trio finished their last run in Memphis that year working against Sputnik Monroe and Robert Fuller. Undoubtedly, their next move did not endear the trio to Jerry Jarrett or Nick Gulas. Phil Golden, the uncle of wrestler Jimmy Golden and the brother of Alabama based promoter Billy Golden, started a promotion in Paducah, Kentucky in the summer of 1972 called *All Star Wrestling*. Weingeroff was involved behind the scenes and the Von Brauners worked for the promotion. The group ran cards in Lexington, Louisville, and in Charleston, West Virginia. Some of the talent included Angelo Poffo, who invested in the company, Lanny Poffo, Pez Whatley (Pezevan Whatley), Mario Galento (the same aging wrestling that tried to attack Jarrett and Lawler), Sweet Daddy Watts, Plowboy Frazier, and Paul Christy (Paul Christerson). The Von Brauners stayed until September of 1973 and the promotion shut down in 1974.

The Von Brauners went to California in 1973 with manager Gerhart Kaiser, who had been working for the All Star promotion in West Virginia. The duo had a good ran that ran well into 1974, facing different combinations of opponents including Rocky Johnson, Don Muraco, Peter Maivia (Fanene Maivia), Pat Patterson (Pierre Clermont), and Mighty Igor (Richard Garza). They beat Patterson and Rocky Johnson for the World Tag Team Titles in March of 1974 and finished their run in the fall.

In 1975, the Von Brauners and Weingeroff were working for The Sheik (Ed Farhat) in Detroit. Kurt often worked against a young Randy Poffo (Randy Savage). In December, the team had their last World Tag Team Title run, winning the Detroit version of the belts from the Samoans, Afa and Sika (real brothers whose last name is Anoa'i). Karl Von Brauner (Donovan) went to Los Angeles as one of Jimmy Dykes’ Infernos, as well as working under his own name. On February 14, 1976 he teamed with Senior X to

defeat Chavo Guerrero (Salvador Guerrero III) and John Tolos for the Americas Tag Team Titles. Long time fans remember Donovan as both a tough brawler and a fine mat wrestler.

Fans from the 1960s will probably never forget the German team that descended from a “line of Teutonic royalty” and their terminally devious Jewish manager. Promoter and Bill Watts described the duo as one of the best tag teams that he ever saw. As Watts told Greg Oliver and Steven Johnson, “The Von Brauners had their gimmick down. They were polished; they were immaculate when they went to the ring; they knew how to work."

Al and Don Greene

"Well…I didn't know his daddy was dead. I did not know that… But your dead daddy is a yellow coward, too!" Al Greene's infamous promo leading to a hair versus hair match against Jackie Fargo.

Al Denny had a problem in late 1950s. He was working as a wrestler in small towns in Tennessee, but Nick Gulas would not hire him. His friend Don Greene worked out an angle with one of Gulas's local promoters that involved his "brother" getting involved in a match. By the time that Gulas figured out that Al Denny was Don's fictional brother, the team was already enraging crowds in the territory. They would continue to do so for many, many years.

Don was the smooth worker of the duo. Outside of tag teams, he held the occasional singles title and wrestled for the NWA Heavyweight Title on several occasions. Al was pretty one dimensional. He beat people up.

It's difficult to know when the Mean Greenes first appeared on the scene. One wrestling historian stated they wrested in Chattanooga in 1957. Results from 1958 show Don working in Florida. They are credited with their first World Tag Team title runs in late 1959, winning the straps from Don and Bobby Fields and later from the Fabulous Fargos (Jackie and Don). The Greenes worked with the Fields tag team duo extensively in the 1960s. (There were three Fields brothers - Don, Lee and Bobby. Bobby sometimes worked as Luke Fields. Their real last name was Hatfield and they were nephews of Memphis promoter Lester Welch and, of course, cousins of wrestler/promoter Buddy Fuller, whose real name is Edward Welch. In 1959, Lee Hatfield purchased the Gulf Coast promotion from Buddy Fuller. The major cities in the promotion were Mobile, Alabama; Dothan, Alabama; Pensacola, Florida; and Panama City, Florida. Lee sold the Gulf Coast territory in 1979, to his cousin Ron Fuller, whose real name is Ronal Welch. It was truly a family business.)

The Greenes would often work in the Gulf Coast promotion, together or separately, and at one point donned tuxedos, top hats, and dyed their hair green while in the territory. After working an outdoor show in the rain, which caused green hair dye to run down their faces, they decided that one visual element of the gimmick was no longer necessary.

The Greenes were in Memphis sporadically in 1960, working a few main events against Billy Wicks and Oni Wiki Wiki (Wally Lamb). They also

picked up the World Tag Team titles from Mr. Moto (Masaru Iwamoto) and Tor Yamata during that year. The pair worked in Tennessee for the first half of 1961 taking on a number of teams including Corsica Joe and Corsica Jean, Don and Luke Fields, Sputnik and Rocket Monroe, Tex Riley and Len Rossi, and Jackie and Sonny (Roughhouse) Fargo. Don picked up the Southern Junior Heavyweight title in July and alternated teaming with Al and “Iron” Mike Paidousis.

Don and Al had a short run in Charlotte in early 1962. Don worked a singles match with former world heavyweight champion Pat O’Connor and they worked as a team against the previously mentioned Paidousis and Tennessee wrestling mainstay Gypsy Joe. Don came back to Tennessee after the run, but Al went to Los Angeles, where he worked for several months in both 1962 and 1965, under three different identities.

After working under his own name in April of 1962, Al transformed into “Jack Blassie.” “Jack” claimed to be the brother of “Classy” Freddie Blassie, but Freddie claimed that he had no brother and he did not know the pencil neck geek that was using his name. Al returned to Olympic Auditorium in 1965, working as both Al Greene and as “The Destroyer.” Dick Beyer was internationally known as The Destroyer and the masked gimmick was given to him by Blassie during a run in Los Angeles in 1962. Beyer was a huge star in Los Angeles, so by promoting someone with a similar build, the promotion could probably get a bigger house than normal and spend less money. On at least one card, Al worked as himself in the opener and then performed in a sold out main event under the mask.

During the early 1960s, Don and Al would work sporadically in Memphis and Nashville, sometimes as a team and sometimes in single matches. They really weren’t working long enough for a major push. In January of 1963, the Greenes won the Gulf Coast Tag Team titles defeating Jack Curtis Jr. (Gil Culkin) and Jan Madrid (Gypsy Joe/Gilberto Melendez). Al worked the Gulf Coast circuit, without Don, during the summer of 1964 and did a tour in Japan in 1965. Don’s family owned an appliance store in Nashville, Tennessee, which may have made him less of a wrestling gypsy than others during that timeframe. At one point, Don opened up a store in Chattanooga as well.

Don worked single matches in Memphis during 1966 and also showed up in Florida during that year. In 1967, the Greenes got back together and worked against The Blue Infernos (Gypsy Joe and Frank Martinez) in Memphis.

Don also received a World Title shot against Gene Kiniski in Memphis during the summer of 1967.

Colorful masked men were filling up cards all around the country in the late 1960s. It was time for Al Greene to grab another hood, as he teamed up with “Pretty Boy” Frank Martinez as “The Blue Demons.” Managed by Mario Galento (Butch Boyette), the blue man group worked in Florida for several months in 1968. Don was working in a television commentator role in 1968, until an attack from Tojo Yamamoto brought him back into the ring. Don worked primarily as a single wrestler for the next several months and received a shot at NWA Champion Dory Funk Jr. in March of 1969.

During the summer of 1969, Al was back in Tennessee looking for work. He was also battling the bottle at that time and Jerry Jarrett told him that he could work on the Memphis side of the territory if he stopped drinking. That conversation led to an incredibly long and successful run for both Don and Al.

The Greene “brothers” won the Southern Tag Team titles on four occasions from September through December of 1969, three of the tag teams they defeated involved Dennis Hall with various partners (Johnny Walker, Jackie Fargo, and Johnny Long). Hall was a solid scientific babyface wrestler that was involved in Memphis tag team scene for an extended period of time during the late 1960s and early 1970s. He immediately left, along with Ken Lucas and Les Thatcher, when Jarrett was officially named the booker in April of 1969, but returned later that year.

In 1970, Don stepped aside for several months and Al teamed with his former Blue Demon partner, “Pretty Boy” Frank Martinez without hoods. The duo had an extended feud with the perennial Tennessee babyface tag team of Len Rossi and Bearcat Brown (Matt Jewel). Surprisingly enough, Don and Al Greene, who had teamed since the 1950s, were about to have the biggest run of their career. Steven Beresford was a British wrestler that was considered too small to be a regular on the American circuits. He transformed himself into a managerial role using the name Sir Clements. He cut quite the dashing figure in his formal suits, derby hats, and accessories like bow ties and monocles. And an ever present umbrella – for fashion and interference. The crowds hated the uppity Brit. The Greenes, by this time were not the fit wrestlers of their youth, but were thick, heavy, powerful grapplers. They rechristened themselves as “The Heavenly Bodies.”

The men started feuding with Jarrett, Yamamoto, and Fargo, who were the top three babyfaces in the territory. They defeated Jarrett and Yamamoto for the Southern Tag Team titles in December of 1970. They spent several months working at the top of the cards against the Jarrett faction or against Len Rossi and Bearcat Brown. On June 7th of 1971, the Greenes headlined the first night that the Memphis crew worked the Mid-South Coliseum, facing Jarrett and Yamamoto in front of 9,000 fans.

In addition to headlining the first night in the Mid South Coliseum, Don Greene was involved in another "first" during this run. Jerry Jarrett's grandfather had been a painter and Jerry had seen him used scaffolding to work in high places. Jarrett was inspired to use the scaffold as a way to hold a match elevated above the ring. In 1971 on a Louisville card, Jarrett and Don had the first scaffold match in wrestling history and, bizarrely enough, it was a two out of three falls event. While by modern standards, it's not much for viewing, the audience loved it at the time. Don, who broke his wrist the second time he fell, probably was not as enamored. (A precursor to the scaffold matches occurred in Memphis on 26 May, 1969, when Johnny Walker faced Johnny Long in a "Gladiator Match." According to the program, "Both men wrestle 8' above ring on 1½' plank." I think it's safe to assume that the future Mr. Wrestling II wasn't executing any running knee lifts that evening.)

The Heavenly Bodies and Sir Clements then created some serious heat on the Nashville side of the territory. Being "tarred and feathered" was a mob form of vigilante justice that has occurred for centuries, Richard I of England made a reference to the act in 1189. It had been performed in different cultures for different reasons, but the act generally involved a mob being unhappy with someone for political or cultural reasons, covering their target's torso and back with hot tar and then rolling them in feathers. The hope was that the recipient would be so humiliated that they would leave the community. The practice continued during the American Revolutionary period for colonists that were viewed to be overly sympathetic to British concerns. It took a racial form in the early 1900s when the founder of the Mississippi National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Dr. J.A. Miller, was tarred and feathered in Vicksburg for taking an unpopular political stance. (Or, perhaps, for founding Mississippi's NAACP).

The Greenes were facing Len Rossi and Bearcat Brown on live television when they did the tar (syrup) and feather routine on Bearcat. Bearcat seemingly went into a panic attack due to the treatment, creating tremendous sympathy for him and heat on the Greenes. This angle led to an extended feud which ended when Sir Clements was tarred and feathered in an arena match in Nashville.

In August, Al was involved in one of the biggest angles and matches in Memphis wrestling history. The feud between Jackie Fargo and Al Greene had been going on for years. A stipulation match occurred where Al put up $5,000, his brother's title, and agreed to leave the United States for one year if he lost. In return, Fargo's hair was at stake. Greene did the typical run down of the opponent, stating that not only that Fargo was a coward, but that he came from a long line of cowards. When told by Lance Russell that Fargo's father was deceased, Al pretended to apologize by the tone of his voice, but concluded that his dead father was a yellow coward as well. Jackie attacked Al and then cried during the following interview over the insult.

Over 10,600 people attended the match, which was an intensely dramatic performance. Al beat Jackie unmercifully with sledgehammer like blows to the head. Fargo juiced and was too weak to make an effective comeback, staggering helplessly all across the ring. Al continued to beat on Jackie until the referee finally stopped the match due to excess blood and Fargo's inability to defend himself. The crowd was stunned to see the Fabulous Jackie Fargo get his head shaved. A few weeks later, the two had a cage match and drew an even bigger crowd.

By 1973, it was time to shake up the Memphis line up. Jim White and Jerry went to the main events with Jarrett, Tojo, and Fargo. Don turned babyface and worked with a variety of tag team partners. Al teamed with Lawler at the end of the year. During the next year, Al would be in another main event tag team with Phil Hickerson. As a babyface, Don was teaming with his former nemesis Bearcat Brown against the Interns. One Saturday, Don's daughter was being interviewed by Chattanooga television announcer/promoter Harry Thornton. Intern #1 (Jim Starr) and Ken Ramey interrupted the interview and the Intern delivered a legitimately heavy slap to the girl. This was a shocking angle at the time and lead to a "Grudge Match of the Year" in Nashville.

Don went back on the road in 1975, teaming with Jerry Lawler in both the Georgia territory and in Florida, as part of the Masked Superstars team. In between those runs, he teamed with Jackie Fargo for a short feud with Otto Von Heller and Karl Von Steiger. Al and Phil Hickerson stopped teaming together in May of that year. By September, Phil Hickerson had a new tag team partner, Dennis Condrey. In essence, the team of Hickerson and Condrey evolved from the Heavenly Bodies duo. Don and Al reformed their team for a short period during late 1975 and early 1976, often working against younger talent like Tommy Rich and Wayne Petty, who would become better known as Wayne Farris or The Honky Tonk Man. Farris may have picked up his finishing maneuver, the swinging neckbreaker, from Don.

The Greenes continued to show drawing power, working a program with Jarrett and Tojo again in February and March of 1976. This run culminated in a rather odd hair versus hair match between Al and Jarrett. The event drew a crowd of over 10,800 fans, who saw Greene, who was already basically bald, get his few remaining follicles shaved. After this run, Don worked in a tag team with the Scorpion (portrayed by Don Bass at this time, earlier in the 1970s Don Duffy filled “The Scorpion” slot).

Don Greene was briefly involved in a competing promotion during 1976. Country music booking agent Buddy Lee (Buddy Lioce) had been a wrestler in the 1950s and decided to start a promotion to compete against Gulas. Lou Thesz and Saul Weingeroff were involved in the business operations. The new group was able to get The Interns/Ken Ramey, the Islanders (Afa and Sika), Frank Morell, and Pez Whatley to join their Universal Wrestling Association. Terry Gordy worked for the company under a mask as Mr. Wrestling. (Terry had debuted as a professional in 1974, when he was 13 years old.) Buddy Lee pulled his financial support after a few months and the new group never really gained any traction.

Don for the most part stopped wrestling after Sam Bass passed away in 1976. He did work several Gulas shows in Memphis in 1977 after the split from Jarrett. In June of 1977, he worked a main event with Ken Lucas against Luke Graham and Ripper Collins in Nashville. Al wound down his career doing some managerial work for Don Fargo and various partners in late 1978 and early 1979.

Al Greene’s career includes with one of the best happy ending stories in wrestling. When Al Greene stopped drinking, Jerry Jarrett developed a

business plan with Al with the goal of purchasing a farm with his wrestling income. Al successfully purchased the land and years later that acreage was sold for a housing development, giving Al a very comfortable retirement. Al and Don Greene were a critical building block of the success of the Memphis promotion in the early 1970s and their impact is remembered today. In the words of old school wrestling fan/actor Mike Randleman, “I still have nightmares about the Greenes. They were bad dudes.”

Sam Bass

“Ring the bell, Lance. Time to bring on the lions,” Sam Bass’s weekly instruction to Lance Russell at the Mid-South Coliseum.

For years, the Gulas Welch wrestling operation was headquartered in the Sam Davis Hotel in Nashville, Tennessee. Wrestlers would come into the office for meetings with the promoters and to receive their bookings. Often, they would be greeted outside by a gregarious Sam Bass. Once Sam had the wrestler properly positioned under a window, while doing something like pretending to help them read a map, Jerry Lawler would dump a large trashcan full of water on them. If you were an unlucky office worker, Sam might season your lunch with an animal laxative procured from the local zoo to see if you could make it to the bathroom before exploding. One elaborate rib played on an unsuspecting secretary involved Sam being “shot” by Roy Welch who then carried his lifeless body to the hotel’s service elevator and tossed him into a dumpster.

Sam Bass, whose real name was Fred Bass, was from Eastern Tennessee and started in the business by hauling the ring truck. He later worked with George Grant, a southern wrestler most noted for touring the circuit imitating the “Gorgeous George” gimmick, complete with mirrors, perfume, and prancing. Grant later worked in evangelism. Bass began working as a wrestler in the 1960s with no great success.

In 1971, Sam Bass, Jim White and Jerry Lawler were all working for the Tri-States promotion based in Montgomery, Alabama. Bass was working as both a manager and a wrestler during this time, a combination of roles he would continue until his death. Lawler and Bass immediately clicked on a personal level, with Lawler loving Bass’s repertoire of devious pranks. Jim White was working in tag teams in Alabama as one of “The Green Shadows” and under the name Woodrow Bass. In February of 1972, Lawler returned to the Gulas circuit. By April, he was working in tag teams with Jim White. Their manager during their first run was “Cashbox” Jim Kent, who would later find greater success in a long association with the Bounty Hunters (the tag team of David and Jerry Novak). Jim White started in the business in a teenager in 1959, but had never been a featured performer. The Lawler/White tag team followed the standard practice of teaming up a younger wrestler with a veteran, so that the younger grappler could learn from an experienced performer. One of the teams that Lawler/White faced

during April of 1972 used this same formula – Kevin Sullivan and Eddie Marlin.

Lawler and White competed on the Memphis end of the circuit through June of 1972. Sam Bass had left the Tri-States promotion in May of 1972 and was managing “The Medics” (believed to have been Jim and Jack Dalton, whose real names were Jim and Jack Baugus) on the eastern end of the territory. In July of 1972, Lawler and White were transitioned to the eastern end of the territory and were managed by Sam Bass, establishing the classic tag team trio. Wrestler Don Greene would later recall to Florida wrestling historian Barry Rose, “Sam had a mind for the business and was always thinking of what to do next. He had good ideas and knew how to draw money.”

Jim White was the straight man on the team. He was the no nonsense tough wrestler component. Lawler was flamboyant, mouthy, and took crazy bumps. Sam Bass stayed out of the way, until it was time to hit the babyface with a cowboy boot or use some underhanded method to gain a victory. Lawler, who had worked as a disc jockey before becoming a wrestler, was a natural on interviews. His verbal taunts and insults enraged the fans. The promotion saw dollar signs. By September of that year, the three men were working main event programs in Nashville. Gulas ran two cities on Monday nights and when this trio was off of the Memphis circuit, they were a major draw in Birmingham, Alabama.

In November, the heels returned to Memphis and received a major push, working programs with Jarrett and Jackie Fargo. They became tag team champions in an extended program, including one event that included boxing champion Jersey Joe Walcott as the referee. Their run in Memphis lasted until August of 1973, working in the main events for many months. In August, Jim White left the team. Whether or not this was a direct cause, Jerry Jarrett made the following point when reflecting on the team to Tim Dills, “One night in a riot, Jim White came to the dressing room with his nose under his left eye. It was the worse broken nose I've ever seen. Jim White fell in love with a black girl and during those days, interracial marriages were the wrong kind of heat.” White went back to the Tri-States promotion in 1974 and worked for several months under his previous ring name of Woodrow Bass. He never had another major run in the business. Bass continued to manager Lawler with partners “The Scorpion” (Don Duffy) and later with Don Greene, but those teams did not have the same

success as the partnership with White. In January of 1974, Bass was back on the eastern end of the territory, working as a wrestler. Bass resumed his managerial duties with Lawler in May of 1974. Lawler worked some tag team shots with Lou Thesz, but had two major singles programs later that year. The first program was against Memphis legend Jackie Fargo, which involved the passing of the torch to the new “King” of the city. The second program was the “Quest for the Gold” program, building to the title shot against Jack Brisco. Bass seconded Lawler throughout these programs which did huge business for the promotion. After the “Quest for the Gold” program ended, Lawler did a babyface run, teaming with Tojo Yamamoto against Al Greene and Phil Hickerson, who were managed by Bass. This program ended with single matches between Lawler and Bass at the end of 1974. The two would not pair up in Memphis again until December of 1975.

Bass had two major tag team runs for Gulas in 1975. On the Memphis side of the territory, he managed Ron and Don Bass (Ronald Herd and Donald Welch). The Bass Brothers (who were not related) had started in the Gulf Coast territory and received major heat with their overprotective, hillbilly mother, Maw Bass. The Maw Bass character was portrayed by veteran female wrestler Mae Weston. When she wasn’t slapping the Bass Brothers around for their shortcomings, she was knocking out their opponents with a loaded purse. After a short run in Memphis, Sam went to the eastern end of the circuit and managed the evil “German” team of Otto Von Heller and Karl Von Steiger during the summer of that year.

Sam Bass and Lawler reunited in September of 1975, but not in the Memphis promotion. Lawler and Don Greene worked as “The Masked Superstars” for Eddie Graham’s Florida promotion. On some nights, Lawler worked the opener under his name and then worked later on the card in the masked heel team. It is very odd that Lawler, who had been a main event performer on the Gulas circuit for two years, was working opening matches in Florida at this time. Bill Dundee has suggested that Jarrett sent Lawler to Florida because “The King” thought he was too royal to work the small towns on the Memphis circuit.

Greene and Lawler feuded with Ricky Gibson and Jimmy Golden in Florida. After about six weeks in the territory, Lawler did an injury angle and was replaced in the “Masked Superstar” team. Sam Bass proved that his ability to provoke a crowd was not limited to the Gulas/Welch circuit. On

Halloween of 1975, the Masked Superstars were facing Mike and Eddie Graham at the Fort Lauderdale National Guard Armory. After Bass unceremoniously introduced Eddie's head to Sam's boot, the Superstars got the pinfall and the crowd rioted, throwing chairs into the ring. One fan that jumped on Sam Bass found out that was a poor decision, after Bob Roop, the promotion's lead heel, beat him to a bloody pulp. The Masked Superstars completed their Florida run in November of 1975. By the next month, Sam Bass was back in Memphis, managing Jerry "The King" Lawler.

Early in 1976, Sam received the opportunity to work a tour with Japan Pro Wrestling. Dory Funk, Jr. remembers that Bass felt truly honored to do an international tour, but his main goal on the trip did not involve the ring; he wanted to drink Black Nikka whiskey. After drinking himself into a stupor one night, Bass passed out on a train ride between shows. The wrestling crew ironically held a mock funeral for Sam.

Bass continued to be active on the Memphis wrestling scene throughout 1976, managing Lawler and being involved in the Plowboy Frazier storyline. In May of that year, he worked a tag team match with Jim White, a rare time that all three men appeared on the same card after the famous White/Lawler team split. On July 26, 1976, the tag team of "The Dominoes" (Pepe Lopez, whose real name was Reuben Rodriquez, and Frank Hester) faced Don Anderson (Duane Bailey) and Don Kernodle (Charles Kernodle, Jr.). Jerry Lawler wrestled Harley Race. A somewhat average crowd of 5,479 fans were at the matches that night.

Sam was drinking on the drive back to Nashville and driving at speeds over 100 miles per hour. When Bass dropped off Phil Hickerson in Jackson, Tennessee, Hickerson kissed the ground. After dropping off Phil, Sam passed a semi-truck on the highway. He then hit another car that was stalled on the road. The truck ran over the top of both of the wrecked cars. Sam's wife could not believe he was killed in the wreck; she thought that Sam would have been clever enough to cheat death.

Upon hearing about the tragedy, Nick Gulas sounded like a man that was now worried about completing his next wrestling card, noting, "It'll be hard to replace them. We'll get somebody else but they won't be the same as Sam or the Masked Dominoes." Sam Bass continued to be mentioned in Memphis wrestling angles for years, including references to a special hair

growing cream that he supposedly left to Jerry Lawler during the Bill Dundee feud and in the Eddie Gilbert “This Is Your Life” skit from 1984.
The passing of Sam Bass had a few additional ripples in the mat community. Don Greene, “I quit the business not long after Sam’s car accident. I had traveled for so many years and hundreds of thousands of miles without ever getting into an accident. So, I decided the time was right and gave the promoter my two weeks’ notice.”
Upon the announcement of the car crash, many of the wrestling fans spontaneously applauded, gleeful to be rid of such evil men. Long time manager J.C. Dykes, who managed “The Dominoes” the night of the crash, quit the business out of disgust. He later went into ministry work.

Bill Dundee

"It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog that matters."

For years, "The Superstar" Bill Dundee was the number two star of the Memphis promotion. His life in wrestling will be forever linked to Jerry Lawler, due to their numerous epic battles or, when both worked as babyfaces, being the top tag team for the promotion. While legitimately probably standing no more than 5 ft 7 inches, Dundee was capable of Southern style brawling or working fantastic technical wrestling matches. Despite his stature, he was able to project a devastating combination of power and speed, especially as a heel. At his peak, his charisma, interviews, ring work, and drawing ability in Memphis were outstanding. Yet, still, second to one.

Dundee entered the world as William Cruickshanks and was born not in Australia, but in Scotland. As a teenager he watched British wrestlers such as Tony Charles and Billy Robinson perform on television. At the age of 17 he moved to Australia. When he first got into the wrestling business, he emphasized his Scottish heritage, wearing a kilt in the ring, years before Roddy Piper (Roderick Toombs) donned the plaid.

Dundee had learned judo while growing up in Scotland and found work as a wrestler on the Australian circus circuit. When not performing worked matches for the circus, he found that he enjoyed practicing with the trapeze artists. That skill would later benefit him when he worked in scaffold matches; Dundee was one of the few wrestlers willing to get off of his stomach and perform high above the ring.

In the mid-1960s, promoter Jim Barnett brought American style professional wrestling to Australia. Dundee worked for the Australian promotion from 1967 to 1974. The Aussie circuit was a big man's territory and Dundee's job was to "put the boys over every Saturday morning." Bobby Shane, who was working Down Under as a booker, encouraged Dundee and George Barnes to work in the Tennessee territory, knowing that it was a good promotion for smaller wrestlers. According to Dundee, it took a year to get the visa paperwork in place to come to the states. (Bobby Shane never worked in Tennessee, but certainly influenced the territory. He gave Jerry Lawler his first crown for "The King" gimmick, recommended

Dundee work in the territory, and died in the same plane crash that Austin Idol survived in 1975.)

In 1974, Jerry Lawler had a huge push in Memphis, replacing Jackie Fargo as the top drawing card in a high profile feud and having the successful "Quest for the Title" program, which culminated in his first match against an NWA World Heavyweight Champion - Jack Brisco. Lawler had a dispute with Jarrett and spent several months in 1975 working full time in the Atlanta promotion. It was a perfect time for Memphis to establish a new headlining presence. Bill Dundee and George Barnes seized the opportunity.

Dundee and Barnes debuted in February of 1975 as cocky, brash Australians, who were, of course, much better wrestlers than anyone in Tennessee. Xenophobia always worked well in Southern wrestling. Heck, even Yankees were foreigners. The Aussies would stand in front of the announcer's table and blast each other with the hardest forearm smashes they could throw. Lance Russell would later recall that when Dundee debuted, he "could hardly say three words consecutively and make it sound like a human being."

The third week the duo were booked in Memphis, they were in the main event, headlining for the Southern Tag Team Titles against Eddie Marlin and Tojo Yamamoto. By March they had the titles and a return match against Marlin/Yamamoto drew a crowd of over 10,000 fans. The duo would stay in main events through May working against various combinations of the Fullers (Robert/Ron/Buddy or Cousin Jimmy Golden). Sometimes they worked six man tag matches with fellow Australian worker John Gray. (John worked as a wrestler from 1972 until 1989. His last match was in Sydney and his opponent was none other than George Barnes).

At the end of May, Barnes had left to go back to Australia. However, the pair made such an impression that the tag team would be referenced frequently over the years. In the summer of 1987, Barnes came back to Memphis and worked a feud with Dundee. While Barnes turned heel by making comments of a racial nature that were embarrassing even by Memphis wrestling standards, the two men still worked very well in the ring. As a blow off to the feud, Barnes had Dundee in the ropes positioned for a superplex. Just as Barnes had reached maximum elevation, Dundee threw him high in the air, creating a massive bump in the center of the ring. The two Aussies were truly tough men.

Later in 1975, Dundee turned babyface in an angle with the Interns (Jim Starr and Tom Andrews), a role he would play for several years. He often wore flashy jumpsuits, replicating the style of dress that Elvis wore later in his career. His boyish good looks made him a hit with the female fans. He worked with a variety of tag team partners over the next few years, including Jackie Fargo, Tojo Yamamoto, Rocky Johnson, Frankie Lane, and Ricky Gibson. In 1976, he won the Southern tag team titles on two occasions, once with partner Big Bad John and once with Tommy Rich. (Big Bad John worked as a wrestler and manager for several years in different U.S. promotions and in Australia. He gave Bill the "Superstar" nickname in an unscripted interview aside. He was reportedly a real life member of the Galloping Goose Motorcycle Club; a group known for street drug distribution. In 1978, John, whose real name was William Goodman, had a role as a wrestler named "Mighty Manuel" in the movie *The Magic of Lassie*. He was fatally stabbed in Bakersfield, California later that year).
In the summer of 1977, the Bill Dundee/Jerry Lawler feud exploded in Memphis. Dundee was the undersized, never say die babyface; Lawler was the cocky, cheating heel, or in Dundee's words, "the Pillsbury doughboy." Their first match on the 4th of July drew slightly over 5,000 fans as Dundee put up $4,000 against Lawler, who vowed to beat him twice in 15 minutes. Dundee won. The next week Lawler put up his Cadillac against Dundee's $4,000. Over 8,000 fans watched Dundee win that event. Lawler then knocked off Paul Orndorff for the Southern Heavyweight Title and put the belt up against the Cadillac. Dundee won again. The next week Lawler put his hair on the line versus the Cadillac. Over 11,000 fans packed the Mid-South Coliseum that night and Lawler came out victorious. The following week Lawler lost the Cadillac back to Dundee, with another crowd over 11,000. On August 15, 1977, Lawler put his title and his manager's hair on the line against the Cadillac. Over 8,300 fans watched Mickey Poole get his head shaved that evening. The feud continued to the 5 September card, when Lawler and Dundee faced each other in a hair versus hair match, always one of the biggest drawing stipulations in the 1970s. Dundee's Elvis like long dark hair was left in clumps in the middle of the ring after the bout, which was seen by over 10,000 fans.
At that point, it would seem as though the feud had run its course. Generally, a hair versus hair match would be the ultimate way to end a storyline. But, Dundee had one more card to play. Jerry Jarrett to Tim Dills,

“Bill came to me and suggested that I talk to Bev about putting her hair at stake. I thought it was a great idea and asked Bill to talk to her about it. He said, 'Hell no and if you tell her I suggested it, I'll say you're lying.' I asked her and her cost was double that of Bill's hair match.” Lawler put his hair up against Beverly Dundee’s hair. This was also advertised as Lawler’s retirement match.

Lance Russell reminisced about that night over three decades later to Memphis writer John Beifuss, “Memphis wrestling started the business in a direction that nobody else had done. When Jerry Jarrett took over the promotion (in the late 1970s), it was the shot of life that it needed. We had storylines that involved real situations -- life, death, marriage, love, all that stuff. It wasn't simply 'I hate you because I'm a wrestler and I want to beat you.' When Bill Dundee put his wife's hair on the line, when he said, 'I want Lawler bad enough I'll put up my wife's hair as the prize,' that was something."

The event drew another large crowd, over 9,000 fans. Lance Russell on the aftermath, “We had this older gentleman there who was the barber and he was in the ring ready to cut Bev’s hair. Up until this point, I think the barber enjoyed the spotlight and thought it was gonna be one of the biggest highlights of his life. But Dundee lost, so here’s this young lady, Beverly Dundee, and the barber just can’t bring himself to take those scissors and start cutting her hair before he shaves it all off. So we had to announce that the barber didn’t think he could go through with it.” The fans were not sympathetic. Russell, “They got so hot, so mad, that they were ready to storm the ring and cut the barber’s hair and do who-knows-what to the Dundees. Finally, Bill told the barber, ‘Please save our lives - get the hair off!’” When asked about the two head shavings years later, Dundee simply commented that he made enough money from the program to put a down payment on a home.

One of the reasons the feud worked so well was because, in Jerry Jarrett’s words, “They didn’t like each other.” Jim Cornette later expanded on the dynamic to Scott Bowden, “Dundee was a workaholic and a good booker who would do whatever it took to become a star. And Dundee was a tremendous worker, that is, when he wanted to work. But Dundee also knew he could never be as big as star as Lawler, who had ‘it’ without even trying. So there was always jealousy.” Jarrett, on the physical nature of their contests, “I often stood at the back of the Mid-South Coliseum and

wondered if their matches had become a shoot." Once again, the lesson was, personal issues draw money. Dundee and Lawler were truly competing for the top slot in the promotion and the fans loved the intensity of their matches. Dundee more than made up for his limited height with his aggressiveness and tireless work ethic.

Lawler's 1977 retirement was short lived and he came back as the top babyface in the promotion. As the number two star, Dundee would often work in the semi-final match. He teamed with Norvell Austin to face Phil Hickerson and Dennis Condrey, as well as the Samoans; later Norvell turned heel and Dundee teamed with Ricky Gibson to take on Austin and Sonny King. Other frequent opponents included Joe LeDuc and Jimmy Valiant. In late 1978, he started teaming with Lawler more frequently, wrestling the Bounty Hunters, Jimmy Valiant/Wayne Ferris, and Hickerson/Condrey. The fans viewed Dundee and Lawler as an unbeatable tag team combination.

Robert Fuller was booking the Memphis territory in early 1979, using a significant amount of talent that generally worked in Ron Fuller's Knoxville territory (such as the Mongolian Stomper, Jimmy Golden, Dick Slater, Kevin Sullivan, Ron Garvin, and Boris Malenko). When Fuller left in June, the wrestlers associated with the Knoxville territory left as well. Jarrett needed a new program for the summer. A concession stand in Tupelo, Mississippi provided the inspiration on 15 June, 1979.

Jarrett was looking for an opportunity to "double cross" the fans, he wanted to shoot a major angle outside of the television studio. He told the wrestlers, "Just go as far as you feel comfortable going. Just tear up that concession stand." After the match ended between Lawler/Dundee against Wayne Farris (Lawler's real life cousin, who would gain fame in the WWF as "The Honky Tonk Man") and Larry Latham (who would become better known as Moondog Spot), the event was supposed to be over for the evening. Later, Lance Russell commented in total darkness "Mike, can you get the camera? They've got a hell of a fight going on down here." As the cameraman descended the stairs, the four men were hitting each other with mustard bottles, pots, throwing pickle jars, slamming each other with tables and chairs and mop handles and anything else they could grab. Jarrett, "We were hardcore before it was called hardcore. My idea was to create a situation that appeared to get out of hand. After the fact and not before, I told the concession owners that I would pay for the damages. This calmed

their nerves. Of course, by the time I got the bill, I could have bought a small market for the cost."

The chaotic concession stand brawl became a recurring feature of Memphis wrestling. The Tupelo concession stand brawl was repeated in 1980 when Larry Latham/Wayne Farris (known as The Blonde Bombers) practiced fast food destruction with Rick and Robert Gibson. In 1981, Eddie Gilbert and Rick Morton entered the concession stand against future Japanese legends Masa Fuchi and Atsushi Onita. The concession stand brawl was moved to Kennett, Missouri when Lawler and Jeff Jarrett repeated the concept with the Moondogs in 1992.

Lawler and Dundee wrestled the Bombers through the summer of 1979, with the crowds often in the 6,000 to 7,500 range in Memphis. After that program had run its course, Lawler turned heel and brought Jimmy Hart in as his manager. Dundee and Lawler had several main events in September and October. Dundee also showed his versatility as a performer that year, working an extraordinary scientific match with former British champion and childhood inspiration Tony Charles.

With Jerry Lawler out of action for most of 1980 with a broken leg, Dundee was one of the top babyfaces to carry the company. He feuded against Jimmy Hart's First Family, as well as against Dennis Condrey/David Shultz and the Blonde Bombers, frequently teaming with Ricky Morton. Dundee worked the main event against Billy Robinson, who he had watched on television more than two decades before, on 28 April, 1980. The crowd of over 8,200 fans was the high water mark for the year until Lawler returned on December 29th. Dundee and Robinson had remarkably exciting scientific matches, certainly the best work in the territory during Lawler's absence. Dundee also worked several main events against Paul Ellering and Killer Karl Krupp in 1980. He then feuded with Billy Robinson during the summer of 1980, drawing crowds in the 7,000 to 8,000 range.

In early 1981, Dundee was back to teaming with Tommy Rich, working against the Bounty Hunters. With Lawler back on top, Dundee was back in the semi-final slot. Dundee then moved to teaming with The Dream Machine (Troy Graham) and later Steve Keirn to feud with Jimmy Hart's faction. In late 1982 and early 1983, Dundee worked a program against the gender bending Exotic Adriane Street, who was managed by Jim Cornette. Street pranced around the ring like the ultimate flamboyant homosexual and would win some matches by kissing his shocked opponent. In reality, Street

had learned how to be a shooter in England and he worked some very… um…stiff matches against “The Superstar.” In March, Dundee, who had been a babyface in Memphis for years, turned heel, beating Terry Taylor for the Southern Heavyweight title and then feuded with Dutch Mantell over the belt in April and May.

Dundee’s heel turn built to a thrilling “Loser Leaves Town” match against Lawler on 6 June, 1983. The two men had been the cornerstone of the promotion for years. “The Superstar” was a relentlessly aggressive heel and truly seemed to push Lawler to the limit. The two men worked a breathtaking match. Dundee had a recurring sequence with Lawler where he would hit him with a series of football tackles and Lawler would bounce like a bowling pin after each one. In this match, Dundee hit two tackles and on the third, Lawler caught him with a perfectly timed upper cut punch. He then landed a pile driver for the three count. Randy Hales, an obsessive fan that grew up watching the weekly cards in Jonesboro, Arkansas in the 1970s and later worked for the Memphis promotion for years, has called this the best match he has ever seen.

Dundee left the territory to work as the booker for a new promotion, started under the banner of *Georgia Championship Wrestling*. As Georgia wrestling had expanded and started promoting throughout the country based off of their cable television presence on WTBS, the company stopped promoting in some of their traditional local markets. *Georgia Championship Wrestling Superstars* was an attempt to get back into those markets, running weekly shows in Chattanooga, Knoxville and several Georgia cities. The roster consisted almost entirely of Memphis talent, including Dutch Mantell, Terry Taylor and Bobby Fulton working as The Fantastic Ones (emulating the Fabulous Ones gimmick), Koko Ware, Ken Wayne, Jerry Novak of the Bounty Hunters, Frank Morrell, Norman Charles Frederick, and “King” Carl Fergie. Jim Cornette worked as the lead heel manager for the promotion, which only existed for a few months. Ole Anderson hated the Memphis style angles and shut down the operation. By September, Dundee was back in Memphis.

During late 1983, Bill Watts, who ran a huge territory covering Oklahoma, parts of Texas, Louisiana, Mississippi and Arkansas, asked Jerry Jarrett to look at his promotion, since business was down. Watts was a large, aggressive wrestler that like to book big, tough men. Jarrett explained to Watts that two types of fans bought tickets – male and female. He was not

promoting talent in a way that appealed to female fans. Additionally, the babyfaces were too strong to be placed in a sympathetic position. While Jarrett would later deny this, Watts and Jarrett agreed to a talent swap at the end of 1983. Watts picked up Terry Taylor, The Rock ‘n’ Roll Express (Rick Morton and Robert Gibson), The Midnight Express (Dennis Condrey and Bobby Eaton with manager Jim Cornette), and Dundee took over as the booker for the territory. In exchange, Memphis received Rick Rude, Jim Niedhart, Masao Ito, and Hacksaw Higgins.

The Mid-South territory exploded with a main event feud of The Rock ‘n’ Roll Express versus The Midnight Express. The Rock ‘n’ Roll Express had been introduced by a series of music videos produced in Memphis and the team was accepted as main event talent as soon as they entered the territory. Jim Cornette had always been a second tier manager in Memphis, because Lawler always worked programs with Jimmy Hart. Cornette was outstanding in his role as the rich, mama’s boy manager. Dennis Condrey and Bobby Eaton were superb workers (Eaton would later become Dundee’s son-in-law) and The Midnight Express did record breaking business when they feuded with Bill Watts and the Junk Yard Dog (working under a mask as “Stagger Lee,” due to a loser leave town stipulation). The program with Watts and JYD, hyped as “The Last Stampede,” made the territory a staggering 1.2 million dollars in a fourteen day run in the era before pay per view events. Mid-South Wrestling had its most financially successful year ever in 1984 under Dundee’s booking. Dundee would enter the ring late in that year to work against Adrian Street. In 1985, Dundee teamed with Dutch Mantell and worked against The Fantastics (Tommy Rogers and Bobby Fulton).

In May of 1985, Dundee returned to Memphis. While he returned as a babyface, he soon turned heel, feuding with Koko Ware and Lawler. On 12/30, the promotion returned to the angle that was so memorable in 1977. Lawler faced Dundee in a match with the stipulation that both Bill and Beverly Dundee’s hair was on the line versus Lawler leaving town. The storyline for the bout was that Lawler had received an eye injury from Dutch Mantell before the match and Dundee was repeatedly able to attack Lawler from his blind side. The two worked a brutally stiff match. For the finish, Dundee threw salt in Lawler’s good eye and got the victory. To the shock of the fans, “The King” had been run out of Memphis.

“The Nature Boy” Buddy Landel came back to Memphis in February of 1986 and began teaming with Dundee. Mantell turned back to a babyface shortly thereafter. Landel and Dundee did a major angle were they attacked Jeff Jarrett, who was working as a referee. When Jerry Jarrett came to Jeff’s rescue, the heels attacked Jerry’s “only good eye.” After the attack, Jerry Jarrett came out and literally cried on the air, saying he could no longer protect his son. Eddie Marlin, the storyline promoter and real life father-in-law of Jerry Jarrett, then demanded that Lawler be reinstated. Due to this heinous attack (and, more importantly, dwindling attendance), Lawler returned in March of 1986. On March 3, 1986, Lawler/Mantell faced Dundee/Landel in what was the last sellout of the Mid-South Coliseum. According to the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*, the feud and angle was so hot that 3,000 fans were turned away that night. The four men had an awe inspiring Texas Death Match on 24 March then went for 75 minutes and 26 falls. Mantell and Lawler won in a creative finish - both Landel and Mantell were too exhausted to continue and the first man to stand was to be declared the winner. Landel was underneath Mantell and used his strength to stand up, but the motionless Mantell, rising on Landel’s back, planted his feet on the mat first. Even after a 48 minute match, the entire dressing room had to separate the four men after the battle.

Dundee kept the heat up high, slapping Lance Russell one week and then teaming with Landel to announce the Memphis television program the following Saturday. Even though they were heels, the duo was so charismatic and humorous that long time fans still talk about “The Billy and Buddy Show.” Inside the ring, Dundee was an insane whirling dervish. In July of 1986, Dundee and Lawler had their third “Loser Leave Town” match, this time with Dundee being pinned cleanly after Lawler landed a pile driver. The Lawler/Dundee program placed third in Best Feud category in the 1986 *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. Dundee and Lawler, who had been the two most dependable drawing stars of the territory for almost a decade, had completed their last major feud.

Dundee left Memphis to work for Jim Crockett Promotions. Jim Crockett had national television on WTBS and was expanding rapidly in an attempt to compete with the *World Wrestling Federation*. Dundee worked on Jim Crockett cards in North Carolina and Georgia. He also worked in the *Central States Wrestling* promotion based out of Kansas City and *Championship Wrestling from Florida,* territories that Crockett had bought

or was working with for expansion purposes. Dundee often partnered with The Barbarian (Sione Vailahi) with Dundee being the worker of the team and The Barbarian doing power moves. In March of 1987, Jim Crockett promoted a show in Memphis, directly challenging Jarrett. Bill Dundee headlined the show, due to his history in the city, and defeated Dusty Rhodes, with some assistance from The Barbarian. Attendance for the event was 3,000, much less than what the Memphis promotion was regularly drawing at the time.

Dundee returned to Memphis in May of 1987, the week after Tommy Rich and Austin Idol shaved Lawler's head. Dundee was Lawler's partner for the remainder of the feud, which ended in a rather odd scaffold match - none of the heels were willing to fall off of the scaffold. Dundee then had his feud with his old partner George Barnes. Later that year, Dundee teamed with Lawler to become transitional American Wrestling Association (AWA) World Tag Team Champions. The Memphis legends beat Doug Somers (Douglas Somerson) and Soldat Ustinov (Jim Lanning) for the belts in Memphis on 12 October, 1987. Dundee and Lawler then did a quick Memphis title switch with Hector Guerrero/Dr. D (Carl Styles), which was not recognized by the AWA, then dropped the titles to "The Original Midnight Express," Dennis Condrey and Randy Rose (Randall Alls) by the end of the month. A few ironies to that match – first, Condrey and Rose were managed by Paul E. Dangerously (Paul Heyman) who had just left Memphis at the end of the Lawler/Idol/ Rich feud. Second, the only time Dundee actually worked on an AWA card, it was to drop the tag team title belts.

Dundee left Memphis in early 1988 to work as the booker for *USA Championship Wrestling*, a Knoxville based promotion owned by Ron Fuller. Fuller had owned *Continental Wrestling*, but had sold several of the towns (including Birmingham, Dothan, and Montgomery) to David Woods. This promotion ran from late February until August. Dundee did work in Memphis for a few weeks after Lawler won the AWA World Heavyweight title. Lawler's first title defense in Memphis was against Dundee and drew only 2,000. The magic was over.

Dundee worked in Memphis for the next few years, with the exception of booking the *Continental Wrestling Federation* in Alabama for a few months in 1989. He brought his son, Jamie, into the business and worked both in Memphis and in Dallas when Jarrett took controlling interest from the Von

Erichs. In the later part of 1991, Dundee went to *World Championship Wrestling* (WCW) and worked on the booking committee. Later, he seconded Lord Steven Regal as manager Sir William. After leaving WCW, he worked for several years in Memphis, still performing regularly at an age when many Americans collect social security.

For over a decade, Dundee was one of the biggest drawing cards in Memphis and headlined a number of sold out events over the years. As Lawler has said on a number of occasions, reflecting on his feuds and tag teams with "The Superstar," "Everything worked with Bill Dundee." Dundee commented on his career in 2011 to Alex Marvez, *"A lot of people came and went, but Lawler and I were the mainstays. I knew what my job was. Lawler was bigger here before I got here. He was 'The King.' He got over with the people. I would never dispute that even in real life. Why butt heads with a guy who owns part of the company? How are you going to win? You can't. The pecking order went Jerry Jarrett, Jerry Lawler, and Bill Dundee. We were really the first to do a lot of things like music videos and entrance music. We had guys with a lot of personality. We were known for wild brawling, but our guys could wrestle."*

Tommy Rich

“Did somebody say something about gettin’ fired up?”

He worked in a main event program within his first few months in the business and purchased an El Dorado Cadillac when he was a teenager. By his early twenties, he was one of the biggest stars in the country. At the age of twenty-four, he became (at that time) the youngest man to ever capture the *National Wrestling Alliance* (NWA) World Heavyweight title, which was the most prestigious belt in the business. He was involved in two of the most legendary feuds in wrestling in the 1980s, one while in Georgia and another in Tennessee. And yet, his career is often viewed as a disappointment by fans who view his work as a case study in unrealized potential. Such is the conundrum that is Tommy “Wildfire” Rich.

Thomas Richardson was a high school football player in Tennessee and his mother, Peggy Richardson, was friends with Jerry Jarrett’s wife. Tommy was enthusiastic about getting into the wrestling business; however Jerry Jarrett initially did not see the potential in Tommy and was reluctant about training him. After giving Rich some manual labor jobs to perform on his property, Jarrett was impressed by Tommy’s strength and work ethic. Rich and Jerry Bryant, who passed away in 1989 from Lou Gehrig’s disease, were trained together in a ring in Jarrett’s barn.

While it is often reported that Rich debuted in 1974, and he may have worked in some of the smaller towns during that time, he first appeared in Memphis in March of 1975. He debuted low on the cards, but was soon facing veteran workers including Al Greene and Luke Graham. He received an immediate push in Nashville in July of 1975, debuting in a main event program with Tojo Yamamoto against the pseudo-German team of Otto Von Heller and Karl Von Steiger, who were managed by Sam Bass. Tojo and Tommy were paired as a mentor/protégé team and picked up the United States Tag Team titles in August. The duo stayed together for most of 1975 and won the World Six Man belts on two occasions with George Gulas serving as the third man of the unit. Rich gained experience quickly, working against established teams such as the Interns, Don/Al Greene, and Phil Hickerson/Dennis Condrey. He also learned quickly how to be a sympathetic babyface, who was quite willing to bleed profusely to get more heat on the heels. If the wrestling business was really about turning red into

green (blood into money), then Tommy was more than willing to do what was required to bring in the crowds.

Tommy had his first meaningful solo run in February of 1976, working main events against Jerry Lawler and defeating him for the Southern Heavyweight Title. Their match on 22 February, 1976 drew a crowd of over 8,000 to the Mid-South Coliseum, a very good number as attendance was generally lower during the first few months of the year. Tommy then teamed up with Tojo and Jarrett for a lengthy feud against the Bounty Hunters and Jim Kent. He also worked a number of six man tags with Tojo and Dundee. On 14 September, 1976, he wrestled Lawler in Memphis again, drawing almost 8,500 fans. Rich then spent several months working on the Nashville side of the territory and based on his opponents, it was obvious that Memphis had a superior edge in talent. He worked "the first scaffold match in Nashville" against Big Butch Malone and teamed at different times with Tojo and Robert Fuller to take on the masked team known as the Superstars. The Superstars were Dick Dunn and Leon Baxter (Baxter also wrestled at times as "The Wrestling Pro"), two men that had just completed a feud against each other on the Gulf Coast circuit before their run in Tennessee. Tommy also was matched against Eddie Sullivan (Reuben Huizar), who had been part of the "Mighty Yankees" team with Frank Morrell in 1968 and 1969.

Rich finished up in Nashville in February of 1977, teaming with Ken Lucas against the Samoans, and was back in Memphis after the Jarrett/Gulas split. He formed a team with Dundee and faced Hickerson and Condrey on a regular basis. During the summer of 1977, his life would change in a dramatic fashion.

The Atlanta office was building Abdullah the Butcher (Lawrence "Larry" Shreeve) as the monster heel for the territory. Jim Barnett contacted Jerry Jarrett looking for a babyface that Abdullah could squash to build heat. Tommy came into Atlanta to do the job, but Barnett felt that he could build Rich into a star in the area. Rich was introduced into the Georgia territory as a rookie that was trying to break into the wrestling business to support his family. He was paired up with a young Tony Atlas (Tony White), who had a very impressive bodybuilder physique for that era. Atlas was so amused at how avidly Tommy would pursue women at local drinking establishments that he gave him a nickname – Wildfire. By September, the young team became Georgia Tag Team champions. In single matches,

Tommy would work lower on the cards, picking up wins over Randy Savage, Buddy Roberts (Dale Hey), Don Kent, and David Shultz. For his efforts, in 1978 *Pro Wrestling Illustrated* selected the three year veteran as the "Rookie of the Year."

Pro Wrestling Illustrated, as well as *The Wrestler* and *Inside Wrestling* were monthly magazine publications owned by Stanley Weston and edited by Bill Apter. Eventually, they were referred to by people in the industry as "the Apter mags." The Georgia office worked closely with Apter, which resulted in Rich being featured on numerous covers during the late 1970s and early 1980s, as various feuds were hyped. The magazines treated the business as a legitimate sport and would include lists on the top wrestlers and tag teams, interviews with the wrestlers to promote storylines, and also had a heavy visual element. Tommy frequently topped or was near the top of the "Most Popular" wrestler category during that era.

In 1978, Tommy's upward mobility would continue. He started facing bigger stars on a regular basis, taking on Nick Bockwinkel and working with various tag team partners against Ole Anderson, who at various times was teamed with Lars Anderson (Larry Heinemi), Stan Hansen, and Ivan Koloff (Jim Perras). He picked up the Georgia Tag Team titles twice that year, teaming first with Thunderbolt (Claude) Patterson and then with Rick Martel, in a heartthrob team that the young ladies adored. After the team with Martel ended, Rich was paired with veteran top names to include Mr. Wrestling #2, Dusty Rhodes (Virgil Runnels), and Edward "Wahoo" McDaniel. A frequent opponent over the next few years was the Masked Superstar (Bill Eadie), who excelled both in the ring and on interviews. Tommy had a natural charisma and an ability to connect with the fans. However, Ole Anderson must also be given credit for booking Tommy wisely. Since Rich was generally facing wrestlers that were more physically imposing, Ole made Tommy a never say die underdog who would sell tremendously, sometimes creating hysteria among his female fans, and make fiery comebacks to win matches. While he appealed to women, his willingness to bleed and brawl also gave Tommy legitimacy to the male audience. For his era, Rich worked at a faster pace than many of the older wrestlers, exploding into his moves and becoming a true hero to a youthful demographic.

Bobby Heenan was in Georgia in 1979 and worked against Rich as both a wrestler and a manager. Killer Karl Kox, a member of the "Heenan

Family," burned Tommy's face with a lit cigar, in a (pardon me) heated angle. Heenan was one of the best performers in the business, but didn't have a positive experience in Georgia. He bought a house in the territory after booker Ole Anderson promised him a long term position in the area. Months later, Ole reneged and Heenan was defeated by Rich in a "Loser Leaves Town" cage match in November. By the end of the year, Rich had replaced Mr. Wresting #2 as the top babyface in the territory and was regularly receiving title shots from Harley Race. He was also feuding with another star that would play a large part in his future - the Universal Heartthrob, Austin Idol.

At the same time that Tommy Rich had become the lead babyface in the Georgia territory, major changes were occurring in television that would radically change the wrestling business. When television was originally developed, channels 2 through 13 were designated as the "very high frequency" or VHF channels and were used by the major networks. Eventually 70 additional channels were established as "ultra high frequency" or UHF. These became independent television stations that frequently relied on cheap programming, such as syndicated reruns and old movies. One type of cheap programming that regularly received high ratings was professional wrestling.

Ted Turner purchased channel 17, WTCG, in Atlanta in 1969. He quickly realized that one of his most profitable programs was the weekly wrestling show and during the "war" between Ann Gunkel and the *National Wrestling Alliance* in the early 1970s, he had two wrestling programs on the air. In 1972, deregulation allowed for increased access to cable television/satellite communications technology. The first organization to take advantage of the new access was a subscription based company called *Home Box Office* (HBO). In 1976, WTCG had been rebranded as WTBS and became the first basic cable network, one without an additional premium fee, to be launched via satellite. As the 1970s progressed, WTBS was become a standard cable option throughout the country.

In 1980, Rich appeared not only in Georgia, but due to the broadening impact of WTBS, also appeared in Mid South wrestling in a continuation of his feud with Austin Idol, appeared at Madison Square Garden, and worked in Joe Blanchard's *Southwest Championship Wrestling*, based out of San Antonio, Texas. The promotion expanded into Knoxville, Tennessee during

this timeframe and Rich continued to chase Harley Race for the NWA World Heavyweight title.

Rich had only worked a few dates in Memphis after leaving for Atlanta in the summer of 1977. In 1980, with Lawler on the sidelines, he was brought back for several months. During a “good guy” versus “good guy” match against Bill Dundee, Tommy “accidentally” hit Dundee below the belt during a transitional move and then quickly followed it up by pinning the “injured” Dundee. Rich followed the match with a taunting interview of Jerry Lawler, shoving Lawler to the floor while “The King” was still in a cast from his broken leg. The ultimate babyface was now a heel, aligned with Jimmy Hart.

Rich worked as a heel for about three months in Memphis. Business was tepid without Lawler, and having the lead heel programmed against Carl Fergie, King Cobra, and Robert Gibson didn’t help matters. He also teamed alternately with Austin Idol and Bobby Eaton to take on Jimmy Valiant and Bill Dundee. In November, Tommy turned babyface with one of the most memorable segments in Memphis wrestling history. His mother, Peggy Rich (Peggy Richardson), was given time to do a promo. She did a first-rate job, going over Tommy’s career and discussing his frustrations with not being accepted by the Memphis fans. As she was concluding the interview, Yamamoto and Valiant, who had been babyfaces, arrived with Valiant barking at Peggy, “I’m sick and tired of listening to this big, flat slob.” Tommy came out to defend his mother and was attacked by Valiant and Tojo, leading (of course) to a major juice job. Rich was left in a pool of blood when Bobby Eaton and Jimmy Hart arrived. Tommy asked Hart, “Where we you when I needed you?” and fired him on the spot. The segment produced a triple turn – Tommy turned back to a babyface and both Tojo and Valiant turned heel. Rich teamed up with Dundee and feuded against the pair, as well as against Guy Mitchell and Roger Kirby, and against the Bounty Hunters. By March of 1981, he was back in Georgia.

Returning to Georgia, Rich was immediately put into a hot feud, teaming with the Junkyard Dog against the Freebirds – different tag team combinations comprised of Michael Hayes, Terry Gordy and Buddy Roberts. Hayes was one of the best talkers in the business and Gordy was one of the best big men in the ring. Buddy Roberts rounded out the trio as someone who could take great bumps and help his younger teammates structure an exciting match.

And, then, out of the blue, April 27th arrived.

Rich had been chasing the NWA title as the top babyface in Georgia since 1979. While he didn't know it until he got to the arena that evening, the decision was made that we was going to win the belt from Harley Race that night. The NWA World Heavyweight Title represented the top touring champion in the business during that time and often the belt would be on the same performer for years at a time. Harley Race had been the primary champion since winning the belt for a second time early in 1977, but it was claimed for short periods of time in 1979 by Japan's Giant Baba and Dusty Rhodes and then returned to Race. The thinking for these short term title switches is that it would give prestige to the wrestler and also make for bigger return business down the road.

Rich defended the belt against Harley in Macon, Columbus and Rome, Georgia during the week and Race won it back on May 1st in Gainesville, Georgia. While many feel that the short title reign hurt Rich in the long run, because he wasn't able to maintain his status as a main event performer on a national level, it is a testament to both Rich's place within the company and the power of both Jim Barnett and WTBS that he was given the strap. Tommy Rich was blessed or cursed with being at the right place at the right time.

Rich teamed up with Ted DiBiase and continued his feud with the Freebirds until June. By the summer, he'd transition to new programs with Ken Patera and the Masked Superstar. Rich had several more title shots against Race that year and also faced the new long term champion, Ric Flair. The readers of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* voted Rich as the "Best Babyface" of 1981.

In 1982, *Georgia Championship Wrestling* underwent a name change to *World Championship Wrestling*, as the promotion began expansion into Ohio and Michigan. Also, two important new faces were brought on board that year – Buzz Sawyer and Roddy Piper.

Buzz Sawyer was insane. Born Bruce Woyan, Buzz had a strong amateur background and specialized in an extremely aggressive style of professional wrestling, often fueled by a wide variety of chemicals. Not too many wrestlers liked him due to his reckless style in the ring. The Sawyer/Rich feud started in 1982, with Tommy often looking like he was fighting for his life. In the words of one veteran performer, taking on Buzz Sawyer was "a hard way to make a living." Both men bled buckets and sold out arenas

throughout the territory. Sawyer would continue to burn bridges within the industry for several years and passed away in 1992.

Roddy Piper had started in the business as a teenager in Canada and worked for several years in Los Angeles, often matched against members of the Guerrero family. Based upon his explosive charisma, he was brought into *World Championship Wrestling* in a heel commentator role, which was a novel concept at the time. Although he was a limited worker in the ring, he could definitely talk people into the arenas. Piper also loved to party and hit it off with Rich on that level. While the company was telling Tommy that he needed to lose weight and get in better condition, he and Piper were living a non-stop rock star party lifestyle. Tommy was teaming with Dusty Rhodes or Bob Armstrong in top level programs against Ole and the Masked Superstar or working solo against Piper, Don Muraco, or Ric Flair. He was brought into Houston on several occasions to work for Paul Boesch and is credited with spiking attendance when he worked an AWA card in Oakland. However, his choices were beginning to catch up with him. After Piper and Rich arrived at a show three hours late, Piper was fired. Due to Tommy's status and tenure with the company, he kept his job.

While Tommy had been riding the crest of the cable television expansion wave, a sea change was about to occur in professional wrestling. Ole had brought in two young wrestlers, Michael Hegstrand and Joe Laurinaitis, who had no ring ability, but had massive physiques. Adapting a visual style from the film *Mad Max 2*, the duo were given the names "Hawk" and "Animal." They wore studded dog collars, spiked shoulder pads, and face paint. They squashed every team they faced, even established names, and became one of the hottest acts in the industry. With the expansion of the *World Wrestling Federation*, which embraced the visual element of wrestling over the in ring performance, the steroid era was underway. Workers that didn't have, maintain, or purchase a more imposing physique were no longer in vogue.

Tommy was involved in programs with Larry Zbyszko, "Killer" (Tim) Brooks, and Bill Irwin during 1983. He also teamed with various partners to take on the Road Warriors. The "Last Battle of Atlanta" occurred as Rich faced Sawyer in a cage match, with manager Paul Ellering in another cage suspended thirty feet above the ring, on 23 October, 1983. The match drew 10,600 fans. Rich won the match ending the seemingly endless feud. While some still pictures exist which show the contest was not short on blood,

there is no video footage of the match. Rich's drawing power diminished greatly after this feud. A December match against Flair for the NWA title in the Omni drew less than 2,000 fans. By the end of February of 1984, Rich left *World Championship Wrestling* and, while he had several successful runs afterwards, he would never again be a top tier star in the industry.
Tommy returned to Memphis in March of 1984 and was ridiculously placed as part of the "New Fabulous Ones" with Eddie Gilbert. Memphis wrestling manager/fan/historian Scott Bowden properly stated that the duo, "Looked like two guys playing dress up in an attempt to look like their favorite wrestlers." After a few months, it was obvious that the imitation Fabs weren't working and they were simply billed as Tommy Rich and Eddie Gilbert. The team stayed together until August and ended with Eddie's duplicitous fake apology angle. Tommy and Eddie then feuded with each other in a program that worked up to main event status in Memphis.
In July of 1984, while Tommy was working programs in Memphis against Ric Rude and King Kong Bundy, another change would occur in the wrestling industry. Jack and Jerry Brisco were never regular workers for *Georgia Championship Wrestling/World Championship Wrestling*, but did own a significant amount of stock in the company. Dissatisfied with how Ole Anderson was running the operation, the Briscos sold their interest to Vince McMahon, Jr. in July of 1984. On Saturday, 14 July, viewers were shocked to see Vince McMahon hosting the show instead of Gordon Solie and the audience was outraged by this change. Fans still refer to this event as "Black Saturday." Ted Turner responded by adding two new wrestling programs to WTBS. One program was given to Bill Watts and a second, titled *Championship Wrestling from Georgia*, was run by Ole Anderson.
After wrapping up in Memphis, and working a few dates in *Southwest Championship Wrestling* against Abdullah the Butcher, Tommy began working again for Ole Anderson. With the new group, Tommy was again teaming with Dusty Rhodes, working against Ric Flair, and wrestling in major cities including Atlanta, Baltimore, and Pittsburgh. However, the group never developed any real momentum and in 1985, Jim Crockett Promotions took over the wrestling slots on WTBS.
Rich worked in Ron Fuller's *Continental Championship Wresting* promotion for a significant part of 1985 and 1986. He often teamed with Johnny Rich (Rod Wilsford, a legitimate cousin of Tommy). The duo worked a long program with The Nightmares, Ken Wayne and Danny

Davis, one of the best working tag teams of the 1980s, but a pair that was too small for the national promotions. Tommy also worked a singles program against the former Assassin Jody Hamilton, who was working as "The Flame" and received one title shot against Ric Flair. His last few months in the territory were spent teaming with Steve Armstrong against Robert Fuller and Jimmy Golden.

In September of 1986, Rich returned to Memphis and teamed with Lawler to take on the masked duo of Fire and Flame. A "Loser Leaves Town" versus "Masks" match drew a crowd of 9,000, one of the last times Memphis wrestling would reach that plateau. The unhooded men were Don Bass and Dirty Rhodes (Roger Smith – the most anonymous performer that worked under the most different disguises in Memphis wrestling history). Tommy then began his heel turn, leading to one of the greatest feuds in Memphis wrestling history. Upset that he wasn't getting any title shots against AWA World Heavyweight Champion Nick Bockwinkel, Tommy interfered in a match Lawler had against the Great Kabuki, costing Lawler the win. Tommy was absolutely fantastic in his heel role in this feud, projecting an unhinged, deranged persona in his willingness to stop at nothing to end Lawler's career. After the infamous cage match where Lawler got the short haircut, the feud still drew impressive crowds, as a Rich/Lawler match on 25 May, 1987 drew 8,500. Tommy was "injured" in the scaffold match on 15 June and left the territory.

Rich started appearing in the AWA (*American Wrestling Association*) at the end of June. Verne Gagne's Minneapolis based promotion was one of the most successful in the country during the 1960s and 1970s, but Verne was not able to change with the times in the 1980s. Vince McMahon seemed to take tremendous glee in cherry picking his top talent. While the AWA maintained a slot on ESPN in 1987, the promotion's glory days were quickly fading in the rearview mirror.

Tommy debuted in the AWA with a program against the "Mr. Magnificent" Kevin Kelly. Kelly's real name was Kevin Wacholz and in 1992, he went to work for the *World Wrestling Federation*, using the name "Nailz." He left in spectacular fashion, somehow deciding that choking Vince McMahon over a payoff dispute would be a logical form of conflict resolution. Tommy worked occasionally against the Original Midnight Express, who were managed by his former Memphis manager/protégé Paul E. Dangerously.

After working a singles program with Adrian Adonis, Tommy left the AWA in November.

During the 1980s, Tommy would frequently work for small, independent promotions in Georgia. In 1988, Jody Hamilton and Joe Pedicino started *Southern Championship Wrestling* from Georgia. In the first major angle of the promotion, Tommy as a babyface was attacked by Austin Idol and manager Paul E. Dangerously. The group was able to book some established names such as Randy Rose, Mr. Wrestling II, and Dick Slater, but never developed a significant fan base. Starting the promotion with a television taping in a bar (Miss Kitty's in Atlanta) did not do much for the production values. Tommy worked a few matches in Memphis against Lawler in February of 1988 and returned as a regular in August. He faced Lawler for the AWA title and worked in a tag team with Buddy Landel. Tommy also reignited his old feud with Jimmy Valiant during this run and showed that he could still be an effective heel. Rich finished up in Memphis in March of 1989 and by the summer was working for *World Championship Wrestling* (WCW).

World Championship Wrestling was second only to the *World Wrestling Federation* as the biggest wrestling company in the United States. The *World Championship Wrestling* name had been established in 1982 and Jim Crockett kept the name when he took over the wrestling timeslots on WTBS in 1985. Crockett, who had done huge business in the Carolinas, decided to make his primary focus not on maximizing profitability, but on competing directly with the *World Wrestling Federation*. In doing so, he alienated much of his core audience in the Carolinas by moving major shows to other cities, deciding that the company should not have a southern/regional look. He overextended himself financially through acquisition of other companies and use of private planes. Also, the booking philosophy did not help. In the WWF, Hulk Hogan was cartoonishly portrayed as a modern day superhero, the ultimate babyface champion. Ric Flair held the title as a heel in WCW and while he was a much better performer in the ring than Hogan, was almost never given a clean victory. Dusty Rhodes was booking for Crockett at the time and seemed intent on making Flair look as weak as possible. Rhodes used one scenario so often, in which Flair appeared to lose the title only to have the decision overruled by another referee due to some small technicality, that it became pejoratively known in the industry as "the Dusty finish." To the casual fan,

it was obvious which promotion had the “better” world champion. The Crockett family had been in the wrestling promotion business since 1931. By the end of 1988, Jim Crockett was out of business. *World Championship Wrestling* had been purchased by Ted Turner.

Ted Turner had a strong sentimental attachment to the wrestling industry, since it had been a key part of his programming for years. Yet, he didn’t understand the business. Often, Turner hired CEOs that came from non-wrestling backgrounds, with the feeling in the corporate world that if you could successfully manage a pizza business, you could do the same with a wrestling organization. Additionally, the business had changed in that the wrestlers were now under contracts to the company. While this may have provided some financial stability for the performers, it had a negative impact on booking the promotion. Under the territorial system, Jerry Jarrett could simply listen to his fan base and push wrestlers based upon the feedback from his fans. In the corporate environment, a wrestler was slotted based upon how much he was paid under his contract. So, for example, it really didn’t matter whether Lex Luger (Larry Pfohl) connected with the fans or not. Based on the size of his contract, he was always going to be a main event star in WCW.

Tommy actually received a tremendously enthusiastic initial reception when he came into the company. However, he wasn’t given a sustained push and worked primarily as a mid-card performer in his three year run. In addition to the way that contract negotiations resulted in pushes, Tommy was also limited by not having the impressive physique that was a requirement of that era. His finishing maneuver, the Lou Thesz press, looked tame compared to DDTs and top rope splashes. Adding to that, while Tommy was only 32 years old when he came into WCW in 1989, because he had been a major star so many years before, he seemed older than he was. Tommy seemed like an aging teen pop sensation, a throwback to a different time.

Rich did work himself into very good ring shape while in WCW and had some excellent matches. At various times, the company did try to give Tommy a bigger push, but once they had established him as a middle of the road talent, he didn’t have the fan credibility for upward mobility. He worked as a tag team with Eddie Gilbert, and as part of a heel stable with Ricky Morton and Terry Taylor in the York Foundation. The York Foundation was led by Terri Runnels using a Wall Street CEO gimmick, so

the wrestlers drolly became known as Richard Morton, Terrance Taylor, and Thomas Rich. He did win the six man World Tag Team title on a few occasions while in WCW, but those belts were mainly passed between mid-card performers in a way to try to make their matches look more important. After doing a high profile job in January of 1992 to Kevin Nash, who was working in his unsuccessful Vinnie Vegas persona, Tommy started working lower on the cards and left the company in the summer.

Rich worked frequently in Memphis in the 1990s, often teaming with Doug Gilbert. The two were paired against PG-13, a team comprised of J.C. Ice (Jamie Dundee) and Wolfie D (Kelly Wolfe) for an extended feud. Tommy had a short run with Smokey Mountain Wrestling in 1995, teaming with Terry Gordy. (Unfortunately, Gordy had experienced a major drug overdose in 1993 and never fully recovered. He passed away in 2001.) Even in the mid-1990s, Rich was one of the few dependable drawing cards on the Memphis circuit.

In January of 1997, Tommy went to work for Paul Heyman's Extreme Championship Wrestling. Heyman had a soft spot for Tommy, who had given him valuable advice when he worked in Memphis under the names Paul E. Dangerly and Paul E. Dangerously in 1987 (the advice generally involved reminding Heyman that his job was to enrage the paying customers, not the people that owned the company). He was brought into ECW as a wrestler and while not in good shape, he did have a very entertaining match with Terry Funk. He then transitioned into a managerial role as "The Big Don" in the FBI – the Full Blooded Italians. Or in Tommy speak, "Eye-Talians." Tommy managed fellow Mafioso made men Tracy Smothers and Little Guido (James Maritato). Rich's time warp interviews, accusing Joey Styles of drinking and calling him "Gordon" (a reference to Gordon Solie) or claiming that the FBI won a six man championship in Charlotte against Ivan Koloff and the Freebirds, were extremely funny. Tommy stayed involved in different versions of Memphis wrestling until the promotions were no longer sustainable. As of this writing, he still works independent shows in Georgia and Tennessee. Whether Tommy's career was ultimately a success is a subjective matter, but there is no doubt that he often drew big money on both a national and regional basis. At his peak, he managed to tap into a uniquely Southern archetype with his endlessly polite ("yes, sir") but equally dynamic persona. One thing we know with certainty

- in a cookie cutter world, we’ll never see another performer like “Wildfire” Tommy Rich.

Jimmy Valiant

"Woo…Mercy, Daddy! Handsome feels good today!"
"Handsome" Jimmy Valiant hit the Memphis wrestling scene in 1977 like a New York freight train. His underhanded and ruthless tactics made him a vilely hated heel, yet he was later equally beloved. His persona was both cosmically spaced out yet endlessly hip, somewhat like a Caucasian version of Bootsy Collins, the outrageous bass player of George Clinton's groundbreaking Parliament rock band. His ability to understand and connect with an audience was matched by few performers.
James Fanning entered the world in Tullahoma, Tennessee in August of 1942. When he was a young boy, his family left the Volunteer State for better economic opportunities, settling in Hammond, Indiana. Fanning developed an interest in bodybuilding at an early age and was working at a gym when grappler Frank Zela, who teamed with Steve Gorbukovich as the Volkoff Brothers (Boris and Nicoli), offered to train Fanning as a professional wrestler. James was thrilled by the opportunity.
According to Valiant, he started wrestling in 1964, which is completely possible, but no wrestling results for Valiant are available from that timeframe. He broke into the business under the name Jim Valentine, teaming with Gary Valentine (Gary Molenhour). A wrestler named Jimmy Valentine worked in Texas in 1966, but that may have been journeyman Charles Weir, who also worked as Buster "Guillotine" Gordon, among other pseudonyms. A result from 20 May, 1967 at St. Andrew's Gym in Chicago, shows Gary and Jim Valentine losing to the veteran Billy Goelz and Johnny Gilbert (Gilbert Sanchez).
Valiant also has discussed working in Tennessee in the 1960s, using the name "Big Jim McDonald." No records exist under that name, but it is possible that as a young worker, he would have only performed as a television job guy and at spot shows, as opposed to the major cities. A Jim Valentino was listed on the Memphis card on June 30, 1969, which may have been Valiant.
By August of 1969, "Jim Valen" was a regular on the American Wrestling Association (AWA) circuit, doing jobs for Larry Henning, Rene Goulet (Robert Bedard), and Luke Graham. He also started working in St. Louis in

1969, which would become a regular stopping point during his later runs in Indianapolis. When Fanning appeared in Detroit, he was billed as John Valen, often spelled “Vallen” in the wrestling results of that era. In December of 1969 and January of 1970, he picked up some victories in opening matches, getting his hand raised against Ken Russell, who would later work as Ken Dillinger.

Fanning worked under the names Jimmy “The Body” Valen and Johnny Valen in Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Minneapolis through August of 1970. A young team comprised of Dick Murdoch and Dusty Rhodes, known as “The Texas Outlaws”, often worked the same cards. In September of 1970, Jim Valen moved to Leroy McGuirk’s Oklahoma based territory. “Valen” worked as a mid-card heel, losing matches to Danny Hodge, Ox Baker (Douglas Baker), and Klondike Bill (Bill Soloweyko). In December, he moved to Texas and received a new name. Johnny Valentine was working as a headliner on the Texas circuit at the time. Fritz Von Erich decided that two Valentines would confuse the audience. On 5 December 1970, Jim Valen lost to Billy Red Cloud (Bill Wright) in Oklahoma City. On 9 December 1970, Jimmy Valiant beat Swede Karlsen in San Antonio, Texas.

On the whole, Valiant fared no better in the results department than he had elsewhere. As a low card heel, he dropped matches to Wahoo McDaniel, George Scott, his Oklahoma foe Klondike Bill, Killer Kowalski, and “Mr. Wrestling” Tim Woods. However, he must have impressed his bosses. He was a good looking young man with a much better physique than most of the wrestlers during that era. After several years in the business, it is most likely that the promoters noticed his innate intelligence and work ethic. When Vince McMahon called Fritz Von Erich in search of a good looking young wrestler to fill a babyface slot, Fritz recommended Valiant. On 6 April, 1971, Valiant teamed with Dusty Rhodes in the Sportatorium in Dallas, losing to Johnny Valentine and Thunderbolt Patterson. On 8 April, Valiant appeared at the National Arena in Washington, D.C., debuting with a victory over Mike Conrad. He was about to get a major run in the most profitable company in the United States.

Valiant would spend over a year in what was then known as the *World Wide Wrestling Federation* (WWWF). Valiant starting by getting wins over lesser known names and by working in tag teams with Gorilla Monsoon or Manuel Soto. His first extended program was against “Beautiful Bobby”

(Bobby Harmon), who had slicked back blonde hair, wore dark sunglasses, and donned flashy jackets. In fact, he looked somewhat like Valiant would look like as a heel, a fact not lost on the promotion. Valiant made his debut at Madison Square Garden on 24 May, 1971, defeating Vincente Pometti via submission with a backbreaker. Another frequent opponent was "The Black Demon" (Anthony Aurelio), who Valiant defeated at the Garden in July. Later in July, Valiant turned heel, his preferred role, to begin a feud with Chief Jay Strongbow. As a heel, he started using the Boston Crab as his finishing hold. He also began teaming with his former foe, "Beautiful Bobby" Harmon.

Valiant received some higher profile matches in September, headlining against Strongbow in D.C. and receiving a shot for the WWWF World Title against Pedro Morales in Philadelphia. He would receive a return match against Morales on 2 October in Philadelphia, losing in a steel cage match. One week later, he would headline against Morales in the Boston Garden. Other opponents during this timeframe included Karl Gotch, Victor Rivera, and Rene Goulet. Valiant also teamed with Stan Stasiak and Freddie Blassie to take on Gotch and Goulet for the WWWF Tag Team straps. At the end of January of 1972, Valiant started working against another gentleman that would make a mark in Memphis, Sonny King (Larry Johnson). King teamed with Strongbow to win the WWWF tag straps later that year. Valiant continued to be a regular opponent of Morales in the smaller markets. He put over Eddie Graham in Madison Square Garden on 22 May, 1972. He finished his first run in New York in June, having established himself as a solid drawing card in the country's most profitable territory. Vince McMahon had immediate plans to bring him back.

After doing another tour of the Oklahoma territory in late 1972, Valiant found a home in Dick the Bruiser's Indianapolis based *World Wrestling Association* in early 1973. One young media personality that Valiant made an impression on was local weatherman David Letterman. When Jerry Lawler and Andy Kaufman made their infamous appearance on the Letterman show in 1982, the host asked Lawler about two wrestlers during the commercial break – Dick the Bruiser and Jimmy Valiant.

Valiant worked as a heel in the territory, most often in single matches, but sometimes tagging with Baron Von Raschke. Valiant also made regular appearances in Chicago during this timeframe. On March 24, 1973, Valiant beat Ric Flair (Richard Fliehr) in the opening match at the Chicago

International Amphitheatre. History did not record which man said “Whoo” more times during the match. Frequent opponents were Moose Cholak, Cowboy Bob Ellis, and Dick the Bruiser. Valiant also worked with Bobby Heenan in tag teams during this run. On 5 May, 1973, Valiant worked a main event in Chicago against AWA Champion Verne Gagne, losing the 2 out of 3 falls match.

Dick the Bruiser was in a promotional war against Ed Farhat in Detroit during this timeframe and a regular city on the circuit, across the border into Canada was London, Ontario. Heenan and Valiant noticed a young man working in Ontario as John L. Sullivan (Thomas Sullivan) and Heenan recommended bringing the grappler into the territory as Valiant’s brother. The first known match for the Valiants was back in the WWWF; however, they did not work as “the Valiants.” Jimmy Valiant and John L. Sullivan appeared in Pittsburgh on 7 September, 1973. Valiant continued to tag with Heenan and work in singles matches for the next few months. He also teamed with Ernie Ladd in a main event against Dick the Bruiser and Bruno Sammartino on 23 September, 1973. On 15 November, a new “bad cat” arrived on the Indianapolis scene, “Luscious” Johnny Valiant. In the words of Jimmy Valiant, the Valiant Brothers were “coast to coast like buttered toast; like Coca-Cola, we were all over.”

The Valiants became the top heels in the promotion, defeating Dick the Bruiser and Bruno Sammartino for the WWA Tag Team belts on 5 January, 1974 in front of 8,000 fans. On 25 January, the same men drew 8,000 fans to Indianapolis again as the Valiants lost the straps. The Valiants regained the titles on 7 February, in a steel cage match. Challengers for the belts included Moose Cholak/Wilbur Snyder, Dick the Bruiser/Bob Ellis, and Paul “Pepper” Gomez/Bobby Bold Eagle (Robert Cortes). In April, the Valiants teamed with Killer Kowalski to face Dick the Bruiser, Ernie Ladd, and Bob Ellis, drawing over 9,000 fans to the Indianapolis Fairgrounds Coliseum. By May, the Valiant Brothers were in the WWWF. In fact, they won the WWWF Tag Team belts their first night in the company, beating Dean Ho and Tony Garea on 8 May, 1974 in Hamburg, Pennsylvania.

The Valiant Brothers were, in many ways, an updated version of the Fabulous Fargos from the late 1950s. With their long bleach blonde hair, outrageous fashion statements (Jimmy used the back of his tights to announce where his “Money Maker” was), and cool heel charisma, the Valiants were wonderfully obnoxious characters. They would never be

confused with Lou Thesz in the skills department, but they gave the paying customers wild, bloody feuds. In the WWWF, the addition of Captain Lou Albano was the icing on the proverbial cake (or the whiskey chaser on top of a beer buzz).

The Valiants defended the straps against “The Happy Hawaiian” Dean Ho and Tony Garea for an extended program, besting them at the Garden on 24 June, 1974. They also faced Sammartino/Strongbow and, at a Madison Square Garden show in July took on Haystacks Calhoun and Strongbow. On 16 August, 1974, the Valiants headlined at Madison Square Garden, a rarity for tag teams, against Sammartino and Strongbow, which ended in a split decision. They also worked six man tag matches on the circuit, teaming with Killer Kowalski to take on Sammartino, Andre the Giant, and Haystacks Calhoun. They had their second main event in the Garden on 7 October, 1974, losing by disqualification to Sammartino and Strongbow. In some markets, they faced Bruno Sammartino and the future “Living Legend” Larry Zbyszko.

They kept the straps going into 1975, headlining at Madison Square Garden again on 20 January, losing by disqualification to Sammartino and Strongbow. The Valiants were headlining most of the cards during this timeframe and Jimmy was also working some nights in single matches against Sammartino, the biggest star in the territory. The Valiants held the tag team straps for over a year, dropping them to Victor Rivera and Dominic DeNucci on 13 May, 1975 in Philadelphia. (DeNucci would later train another WWF Champion who did a tour on the Memphis circuit, Mick Foley.) The Valiants finished their WWWF run in July and then went to the *American Wrestling Association* (AWA).

For the better part of the next year, the Valiants would work the AWA towns, from Rockford to Minneapolis to Green Bay to Omaha to Davenport to Denver to Chicago. The Valiants were put over by co-winning battle royals and feuded with Jos LeDuc/Ivan Putski (Joseph Bednarski) and Dusty Rhodes/Ivan Putski. The Valiants were still a special attraction in the WWWF. They made a shot in Madison Square Garden in August to put over Andre the Giant and Verne Gagne. In December, they appeared in the Boston Garden, working a main event draw with Bobby Duncum facing Gorilla Monsoon, Larry Zbyszko and Jay Strongbow. While they often worked the semi-final match in the AWA, they did not have a run with the tag team belt. They were still behind Dick the Bruiser and the Crusher in

the AWA seniority system. Frequently, they faced the young team comprised of Greg Gagne, Verne's son, and Jim Brunzell.

The Valiants received a series of title shots against Dick the Bruiser and the Crusher, but Da Bruiser was often working in his home territory. Just as often the Valiants faced the Crusher and Pampero Firpo in non-title bouts. In singles competition, Jimmy would get the bigger push, working against the Crusher, LeDuc, or Larry Henning. They ended their run dropping a series of "Loser Leaves Town" matches to LeDuc and Henning. Given the push and success the Valiant Brothers had in the WWWF, they seem to have been underutilized in the AWA.

Their next stop was in Georgia, where they picked up the Georgia Tag Team Titles from Dean Ho and Ken Mantell on 6 August in Atlanta. They dropped the straps to the subtly named "Black Bombers," comprised of Bobby "Porkchop" Cash and Tom Jones, on 3 September. Georgia was not a major tag team territory at the time and the pair ended their run in late September. Moving to San Francisco, the Valiants defeated The Royal Kangaroos (Lord Jonathan Boyd and Norman Charles Frederick III) for the NWA "World Tag Team" Titles on 4 December, 1976. They would drop those titles to Pat Patterson and Pepper Gomez the following February. After that run, the Valiants returned to Dick the Bruisers' *World Wrestling Alliance* and also made occasional appearances in AWA cities and St. Louis. Jimmy worked a headline feud with perennial WWA champion Dick the Bruiser.

In June, the Valiants would have another set of WWA "World Tag Team" belts, winning them from Moose Cholak and Paul Christy in Indianapolis. (Edward Cholak wore a moose head and antlers to the ring, with the antlers reportedly weighing over 100 pounds. He most likely would have never been selected to be a spokesperson for PETA). Jimmy Valiant made an appearance for Nick Gulas in Nashville in June of 1977. He also worked a match against WWWF Champion Superstar Billy Graham in St. Louis that August.

On 13 September, Lawler defeated Bill Dundee in Memphis with the stipulation that Beverly Dundee's head would be shaved and "The King" "retired" from professional wrestling. On 19 September, a one night tournament was held to fill the Southern Heavyweight Champion slot. Jimmy Valiant, who had never appeared in Memphis before that night and was virtually unknown to the fans of the territory, won the tournament.

There are two versions of how Jimmy came into Memphis. According to Jerry Jarrett, Valiant had sent publicity photos to the promotion and requested bookings, which is the typical way that wrestling worked at that time. According to Valiant, Jarrett had contacted Dick the Bruiser asking for a heel to come and work for only one evening. Of course, some combination of the two stories could be true. During Lawler's short lived retirement, "Handsome" Jimmy bested "Mr. Wrestling" (Dick Steinborn) and King Cobra. When only 2,600 fans came to see King Cobra's attempt to knock off Valiant, Lawler's retirement suddenly ended. The return was set up by a strong angle, with Lawler singing at a concert, since music was the focal point of his "retirement." Valiant attacked Lawler during the performance and beat him senseless with a guitar. Lawler had been immediately turned from a hated heel to the promotion's top babyface. Being attacked while defenseless was bad enough, but when the perpetrator was a condescending loud mouth from New York City, that was simply unacceptable.

Jarrett later reflected on Valiant's personality. "Wrestlers, in general, are terrible actors, so let them just play themselves. Dusty Rhodes is Dusty Rhodes on camera, in the dressing room, in the car. Jerry Lawler is exactly the same. Jerry Lawler is that funny. Hulk Hogan is Hulk Hogan 24-7. Everybody, who is really good, is themselves — except Handsome Jimmy Valiant. Away from the camera, he is quiet, almost bashful, an introvert until the music starts."

There was tremendous chemistry with Lawler and Valiant due to their characters being polar opposites. While Lawler was "The King," he was still a direct talking local boy. Valiant came off like he was from a completely different planet and often bragged about making movies or dating Linda Ronstadt. On the live television program, Valiant made the occasional reference to recreational drugs, which must have driven Jerry Jarrett insane. On one promo, he referenced his access to "a whole pound… a whole pound of Columbian gold…a whole pound, daddy." Lawler quickly intervened to change the subject. Valiant ended another promo with the declaration, "Now I am going to go to the back and do some more drugs." Lance Russell stated, "Awww…Jimmy," and then earned every penny of his salary for the next decade by adding, "Valiant has been taking medicine for a sinus condition."

Valiant was working the major cities in two promotions. For example, on 8 October, he headlined with “Luscious” Johnny in a Texas Death Match against Dick the Bruiser and Wilbur Snyder, drawing 8,100 fans in Indianapolis. On 10 October, Lawler and Valiant drew almost 7,000 fans to Memphis. Two weeks later, the Valiant Brothers took on Lawler and Norvell Austin in Memphis, drawing over 9,200 in attendance. It was a very lucrative time to be “Handsome” Jimmy.

While business usually went down during the winter, the Valiant and Lawler feud did very good box office for months. In November and December, they drew crowds in the 7,500 to 8,000 range. On 11 December, Lawler faced NWA World Heavyweight Champion Harley Race, which ended in a one hour draw. A no disqualification, no time limit match was booked for 18 December and the Memphis fans knew that Lawler could win the belt with those stipulations. Over 9,600 fans came to the Coliseum that night and when Lawler got ready to deliver a pile driver to Race, the crowd was primed for victory. At that moment, Valiant, who was not booked on the card, stormed into the ring and busted a beer bottle over Lawler’s head. The match was declared a disqualification. Jimmy Valiant was one seriously hated man.

Over 10,000 fans came on 2 January, 1978 to watch Lawler attempt to get his revenge on Valiant. Lawler dropped the match and over 8,700 fans returned the next week. The program was hurt by an advertised “hair versus hair” match on 23 January. Surprisingly, only 7,000 fans showed up for the stipulation match. Many were not happy they did. Valiant came out on crutches and said he couldn’t wrestle that evening. Valiant then bashed a distracted King with a crutch and Lawler was unable to wrestle. Once the fans realized that the advertised stipulation was not going to take place, they rioted. The fans ripped out seats and smashed doors at the Coliseum. However, the feud was so hot, the fans couldn’t stay away for long. A show on 5 February, with no stipulations, drew over 9,000.

While Johnny Valiant wasn’t a regular in Memphis, the Valiant Brothers still teamed on the Indianapolis circuit. They dropped the WWA Tag Titles to Dominic DeNucci and Wilbur Snyder in March of 1978. They would win the straps back in July and hold onto them through December. At this point, the Valiant Brothers were generally working the semi-final match while Dick the Bruiser worked the main event in single matches. In Memphis, Lawler was starting a program with Joe LeDuc, but a main event against

Valiant at the end of March drew over 8,000 fans. At that point, Valiant switched to a babyface and starting teaming with Bill Dundee. Dundee and Valiant worked for several weeks in April against Sonny King and Joe LeDuc, then transitioned into six man tags with Lawler versus King, LeDuc, and John Louie. In Indianapolis, Valiant was transitioned back into a seemingly endless feud with Dick the Bruiser and Da Bruiser also worked in Memphis and Louisville during 1978, taking on Joe LeDuc.

Dundee and Valiant didn't have any great tag teams to face in Memphis and eventually Valiant turned heel again. However, Valiant had been so entertaining as a babyface, the fans could never work up the genuine hatred for him again. Whether singing "Son of a Gypsy" ("I came rolling into Mempho, TWA/Tell all the ladies Handsome Jimmy's on his way") or bragging about his "Doberman Pinscher waist" or flexing his pectoral muscles while screaming "Mercy, Daddy!," he generated a warmth that somewhat transcended the traditional wrestling role. In September, he began teaming with Wayne Farris in Memphis, giving Farris the rub of working with a major star. He also received two title shots against AWA Champion Nick Bockwinkel in September of 1978 in Memphis. Jarrett would later state that one of his biggest mistakes as a booker was asking Valiant to work a Bockwinkel style (i.e., technical wrestling) match with Nick. Valiant was a limited worker at best and the match was an eyesore.

"Luscious" Johnny made his last appearance in Memphis in October, as the Valiant Brothers put over the Bounty Hunters, "brothers" Jerry and David Novak, who had several successful runs in Tennessee during the 1970s. On 21 November, 1978, the Valiant Brothers appeared at a WWWF taping in Allentown, Pennsylvania. They dropped the WWA World Tag Team Titles to Wilbur Snyder and Pepper Gomez on 2 December. Jimmy worked in Memphis through the end of December. The promotion drew no attention to the fact he was leaving.

Vince McMahon, Sr., always booked for months in advance and the plan was for the Valiants to win the WWWF Tag Team Titles. They were immediately moved into the title picture, challenging Tony Garea and Larry Zybyszko for the belts. However, early into their run, Jimmy found himself significantly ill with hepatitis. A new Valiant was brought into the territory. Jerry Valiant (John Hill) was a twenty year veteran that had wrestled as Guy Mitchell and under hoods with a variety of names. At a television taping on 6 March, 1979, Jerry and Johnny won the belts with an outside assist from

Jimmy. By April, Jimmy was well enough to work six man tags as the Valiants took on Andre the Giant, Steve Travis (Steve Musulin), and Fred Curry (Fred Koury). The Valiants remained a main event act on the circuit, headlining in Long Island and Boston. During this time, the Valiants starting bridging the wrestling generations, working with established foes such as Dominic DeNucci and with young talent including Ted DiBiase and Tito Santana. Jimmy received a title shot against Bob Backland in Worcester in May for the WWF Championship. (The company had lost one "W" earlier in the year). Jimmy also challenged DiBiase for the North American Championship strap.

On 30 July, the Valiants were once again headlining Madison Square Garden, teaming with Captain Lou Albano to take on Andre the Giant, Ivan Putski, Tito Santana, and Dominic DeNucci. Working the opening match that night was a young grappler that would help revolutionize the business in the next decade, Roddy Piper. While Valiant was still a regular in the WWF in 1979, he did work a few shots in Memphis in August, teaming with Steve Regal to face Michael Hayes and Terry Gordy in a main event that drew almost 6,000 fans. The next week he teamed with Regal to take on "The Blonde Bombers," Wayne Farris and Larry Booker. He also returned on 3 September to face Ron Bass.

In September, Andre the Giant and Tito Santana beat Jimmy and Jerry Valiant at Madison Square Garden. In October, the Valiants would make their final appearance at the Garden, with Jerry and Johnny dropping the tag team belts to Ivan Putski and Tito Santana. Jimmy Valiant was defeated by Dusty Rhodes. The Valiant era was coming to a close. They spent the next few months doing jobs for the babyfaces and finished up in December. The Valiant "Brothers," who had been a major draw all over the country, had ended their run as a tag team. Johnny Valiant (Thomas Sullivan) transitioned into a managerial role in the 1980s in the AWA and the WWF. Jerry Valiant (John Hill) worked for Dick the Bruiser after leaving the WWF, then worked as a preliminary wrestler for the WWF in 1984 before leaving the business.

Jimmy Valiant, who had been a major star in Indianapolis for years, would never go back to work for Da Bruiser. Dick the Bruiser (William Afflis) had been a professional football player and a main event wrestler since the 1950s. He couldn't imagine anyone but Dick the Bruiser in his main event slots and steadily lost business in the 1980s. He developed a brief talent

exchange with Jerry Jarrett in 1982, but Jarrett thought that Afflis was misusing the Memphis wrestlers to boost his own ego. Even before the WWF expansion started killing territories, the WWA contracted into a small independent group, where young wrestlers could train, but where no real money could be made. The Bruiser went out of business in the late 1980s and passed away in 1991.

"Handsome Jimmy" returned to Memphis in January of 1980, working as a heel with Lawler under the management of Jimmy Hart. After Lawler broke his leg, Valiant turned babyface to feud with Hart's men as the major angle in the promotion. As a babyface, Valiant and Dundee drew over 8,200 fans facing Jimmy Hart, Paul Ellering, and Ali Hassan on 17 February. The Valiant/Ellering feud drew almost 6,800 fans on 25 February and 7,440 attended on 2 March. Attendance would taper off after the initial babyface turn, but Valiant and Ellering still drew over 5,000 in early April. Dundee and Valiant worked as the top babyfaces that year, rotating main events and sometimes working as a tag team. On 1 September, Valiant worked a main event against Tommy Rich and Lawler appeared on the card as well; the event drew over 7,600. In the fall, Dundee and Valiant teamed up to face heels Tommy Rich and Bobby Eaton. At the end of the year, preparing for Lawler's return, Valiant turned heel in the memorable angle with Peggy Rich, Tommy's real life mother. Valiant wrestled "Kingfish" Lawler in February and March with his last appearance, on 9 March 1981, drawing a crowd in excess of 7,900. While business wasn't consistently great during Lawler's absence, Valiant showed that he was still a major drawing card for the territory.

Leaving Memphis, Valiant went to Florida to work for the *Sun Belt* promotion, a new group being managed by Louie Tillet, Don Curtis (Don Beitelman), and Boris Malenko (Larry Simon) that was going to run competition to Eddie Graham's *Championship Wrestling from Florida*. Of course, one of the major reasons that the *National Wrestling Alliance* existed was to ensure that the established promotions could fend off challenges from competitors. Additionally, Eddie Graham was one of Jerry Jarrett's closest friends in the business. It did not take long for Valiant to receive a phone call from Jarrett, asking him to leave this start up venture. Valiant was given the option of returning to Memphis to work as the booker for the promotion or to go to either Atlanta or Charlotte. Valiant started in

the Carolina promotion in April of 1981, but he left the “Handsome” moniker in the Sunshine State.

Inexplicably, Valiant was working a variation of the heel Lawler gimmick. Under the management of Lord Alfred Hayes, Valiant was billed as “King James the First.”

The gimmick did not work. Instead of the exuberant “Handsome” Jimmy persona, the “King” spoke in slow, measured tones. As “King James,” Valiant took on various babyfaces including Dewey Robertson (who would later evolve into “The Missing Link” character), the Masked Superstar, and Paul Jones. In August, Jerry Jarrett arranged for Valiant to return to Memphis to team with Jerry Lawler to take on the Dream Machine and Bugsy McGraw. The return of “Handsome” Jimmy on 3 August sold out the Mid South Coliseum. When Charlotte booker Ole Anderson heard how successful Valiant was in Memphis, he decided it was time for a character change. Valiant spent three weeks in Memphis in September, picking up the Southern Heavyweight title from the Dream Machine and working main events, while he started growing a beard for his return. When he returned to Charlotte in October, he had a new theme song (“The Boy from New York City” by The Manhattan Transfer) and a new name. “Handsome” Jimmy was now the “Boogie Woogie Man.” Where “Handsome” was cool and cocky, the “Boogie Woogie Man” was a man of the people. With the Rip Van Winkle facial hair, fans in the mountains of Virginia and the rural Carolinas could relate to Valiant’s appearance. His high energy nonstop movement shtick kept the audience enthralled. No announcer was safe from an impromptu “Boogie Woogie Man” smooch.

Valiant picked up the Mid-Atlantic Television Title from Ivan Koloff in January and the two men feuded over the strap for the majority of the year. Valiant won the same belt from Koloff in June and October. Valiant was often in the semi-final match or main event while feuding with Koloff. On 7 March 1982, Valiant won a “Cadillac Tournament” in Toronto, beating Austin Idol and Jesse Ventura (James Janos) in the one night event (also on the card were Mike Rotundo, John Studd, Ricky Steamboat, Adrian Adonis, Roddy Piper, Dino Bravo, and Jake Roberts). On 2 August 1982, Valiant was scheduled to wrestle Kimala (James Harris) in Memphis and over 11,000 fans showed up for the event. However, Valiant missed the event due to illness and returned to face Kimala on 23 August. That main event, after Kimala had suffered his first defeat from Lawler, drew almost 9,000

fans. In the Carolinas, Valiant began a feud with Jos LeDuc, received a shot at Ric Flair's World Title belt, and teamed with Sweet Brown Sugar (Skip Young) in an unsuccessful attempt at taking the World Tag Team straps from Sgt. Slaughter (Robert Remus) and Don Kernodle.

Valiant stayed in Charlotte in 1983, feuding with the One Man Gang (George Gray, later known as Akeem in the *World Wrestling Federation*) and his manager Sir Oliver Humperdink. He then transitioned into an extended program with the Great Kabuki (Akihisa Yone Yoshi Mera) and his manager, Gary Hart. Kabuki had a phenomenal gimmick, created by Hart, with his face frequently hidden by hoods or his own mop style hair cut. He would often perform a nunchaku routine before matches and used faced paint before that was popularized by a broad variety of performers later in the 1980s. Major angles with Kabuki often involved his "Oriental mist" which he would spray from his mouth into the eyes of his opponents, blinding his foes. (The mist would not always be the same color, because Kool-Aid has always been available in a variety of flavors). The distinct differences between the mysterious Oriental heel and the jubilant Boogie Woogie Man made for a great box office attraction.

After dropping a "Loser Leaves Town" match to Kabuki, due to Hart's outside interference, a new masked wrestler named Charlie Brown came into the territory. Charlie Brown, whose elongated beard was visible through a short mask, had a striking resemblance to the Boogie Woogie Man. Gary Hart was outraged by this deception. On 29 August, 1983, Valiant returned to Memphis to team with Lawler and Idol against the Assassins (Don Bass and Roger Smith) and Ken Patera. Valiant used the trip to further the Charlie Brown angle, having Larry Booker (Moondog Spot) don the Charlie Brown mask and claim that he was Charlie Brown. The Boogie Woogie man vouched heartily for the hooded man who had a long beard similar to his, noting, "I know he's cool, daddy, because I met him in jail!"

On 24 November, 1983, Jim Crockett Promotions held their first "Starrcade" event, which was booked in Greensboro, North Carolina and viewed via closed circuit in other venues in the South. This event, which was a precursor of pay-per-view wrestling, had Ric Flair beating Harley Race for the NWA World Heavyweight Title in the main event and also had the legendary "dog collar" match between Roddy Piper and Greg Valentine.

On that night, Charlie Brown beat Kabuki to win the Mid-Atlantic Television Title.

In 1984, Valiant teamed with Rufus R. Jones (Carey Lloyd) and had a program with the Assassins in North Carolina, this team being comprised of the original Assassin Jody Hamilton and his partner Hercules Hernandez (Ray Fernandez). Valiant also started a seemingly endless feud with manager Paul Jones and his "Army" during this year. In March, the promotion started a series of events known as "Boogie Jam 84," which often featured Valiant unmasking Hercules Hernandez in hair versus mask matches. The event in Greensboro on 17 March 1984 featured Valiant in the main event over a one hour draw for the NWA Title between Ric Flair and Ricky Steamboat. "Boogie Jams" were held not only throughout the Crockett territory, but in Memphis on 2 April (where Valiant faced Assassin #1) and in Miami Beach where Valiant teamed with Dusty Rhodes to take on Kevin Sullivan and Buzz Sawyer in the main event.

On June 25, 1984, Valiant made an appearance in Memphis, working against Ric Rude. At that time, Jarrett and Lawler began making a pitch for Valiant to return full time. Austin Idol had just left the company and the promotion needed another strong babyface on top. Valiant agreed, but with a most interesting contract stipulation – Jarrett had to purchase a house for the "Handsome" one, as he was still known in Mempho. After a tag match with Valiant and Lawler against Ric Rude and King Kong Bundy drew over 9,500 fans on 6 August, Jarrett deemed that the house was a wise investment. By October, Valiant was back full time in the Memphis promotion.

However, at this point, Memphis was beginning to feel the impact of cable television and the large national promotions taking the best talent. Valiant was programmed in feuds with the Dirty White Boys and "Iron" Mike Sharpe. The White Boys, Len Denton and Tony Anthony, were fine wrestlers but not a major drawing card. Mike Sharpe, who was receiving a big push in Memphis, had been used as a television jobber in the *World Wrestling Federation*. In addition to working in Memphis, the contractual agreement allowed Jarrett to book Valiant in other territories, yet Valiant had a weekly pay cap. Any money earned above the cap went to Jarrett and Lawler. Valiant was working regularly for Ole Anderson's *Championship Wrestling from Georgia* group, but receiving no additional compensation. By February, Valiant was out of Memphis. He finished his run with the

Georgia group in March, winning a series of matches against the Barbarian (Sione Vailahi). In April, he was back in Jim Crockett Promotions. By this time, Crockett had taken over the wrestling time slot on WTBS. The Boogie Woogie Man was on the national scene.

In 1985, Valiant worked programs in the Carolinas with "Superstar" Billy Graham and with the Barbarian. At the Great American Bash in Charlotte on 6 July, Valiant pinned Paul Jones, but was attacked by Adbullah the Butcher after the bout. On 30 September, the Great American Bash show came to Memphis, Valiant teamed with Dundee against the Sheepherders (Luke Williams and Butch Miller). Toward the end of the year, Valiant worked a program with Jim Cornette's Midnight Express (Dennis Condrey and Bobby Eaton). At the Starrcade in Atlanta on 28 November, 1985, Valiant and Ron Garvin, who was dressed in drag as "Miss Atlanta Lively" (you can't make this stuff up), defeated the Midnight Express in a Tuxedo Street Fight. In 1986, Valiant started moving down the cards, losing a series of matches to Tully Blanchard. At the 1986 Starrcade held in Greensboro, North Carolina on 27 November, Valiant beat Paul Jones in a "hair versus hair" match, ending their long program.

By 1987, Valiant was moved to the opening or second match on the card. During that summer, he started a comedy tag team with Bugsy McGraw, but their off the wall antics did not connect with the fans. Valiant finished up with Crockett Promotions in early 1988 and returned to Memphis. He would continue to work occasionally in Memphis during the next several years, even defeating Lawler twice for the "Unified World Heavyweight" title in 1990. As the decade went on, Valiant became a vegetarian and lost a substantial amount of weight. His somewhat gaunt appearance, including a substantial tattoo collection, was completely different that the muscled, confident, strutting man that appeared on the Memphis wrestling scene in the 1970s.

On November, 1996, the Valiant Brothers were inducted into the *World Wrestling Federation* Hall of Fame, the first tag team to receive that honor. Valiant retired from the ring in January of 2005, but has kept busy with his "Boogie's Wrestling Camp" that he started in Shawsville, Virginia in 1993. As of this writing, the Camp is open to the public every Sunday afternoon.

"Handsome" Jimmy Valiant had a special way of relating to a crowd, not unlike the connection a charismatic preacher might have with his parishioners. He transformed from a successful tag team to a main event

singles star and transitioned into a new character after he turned 40, giving him several more successful years in the business. He was a headline star in different territories throughout the country for well over a decade. Jimmy Valiant was a limited worker in the ring, yet an outstanding entertainer. Mercy.

Joe LeDuc

Joe LeDuc being interviewed by Lance Russell with blood streaming down his face, "But I'm going to tell you what I'm going to do, Jerry Lawler. You tell everybody how crazy I am. I'm gonna show you I'm not that crazy. (Twitches. Eyes bug out). I'm going to take an oat(h), you know what that is? I'm gonna tell you what it is. I'm going to cut my arm. And if I don't do what I tell you Monday night…I'll never be able to look at myself in the mirror as long as I live. But I'm going to do it! Now, Jerry Lawler, you hear this…Jerry Lawler, you hear this. (Starts slicing arm). I'm going to mess up your face. And that's the last match I'll have with you, Jerry Lawler. AHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!! (Cuts into arm; sees blood, calms down). Alright. You see this right here. Look at it, boy."

Lance Russell reflecting on the incident years later, "You can't believe how many people still ask me, 'Did he really cut himself?' Buddy, he almost cut his arm off, and I tell you that shocked me."

When people remember Joe LeDuc, most often billed as Jos LeDuc, several different facets of his personality emerge. By all accounts, he was a voracious party animal, yet he was also known for his kindness to people inside and outside of the business. Wrestlers recall his superhuman strength and promoters discuss his willingness to do anything to draw crowds. Yet, the maniacal, hard living lumberjack routinely sent Christmas cards to Memphis announcer Dave Brown, from whatever territory he was working.

Michel Pigeon was born in Canada and, while in his early twenties, worked for the Quebec provincial police. He developed a friendship with Paul LeDuc, who encouraged him to become a professional wrestler. Paul was a smaller, quicker man. Michel Pigeon became his "brother," Jos LeDuc, and was hailed as the "Canadian Freight Train." He lived up to the billing. Jos LeDuc was raw power.

The LeDuc brothers started their career in Stu Hart's *Stampede Wrestling* in 1968. While the team was based in Canada until 1973, they did tours in Portland and Amarillo, where Jos worked in tag team matches against future AWA and NWA World Champions Nick Bockwinkel and Terry Funk. It quickly became obvious to promoters that Jos could draw money. In 1970, he was brought into Pittsburgh to work a series of matches against WWWF Champion Bruno Sammartino. In the early 1970s, he was also brought into Los Angeles to put over Mil Mascaras and into Japan to do the

honors for Giant Baba and Antonio Inoki. Defeating the young powerhouse made top babyfaces appear even more heroic.

Paul and Jos LeDuc were a main event tag team in Canada. While debuting in Stampede, they wrestled more frequently in Quebec, working against various tag teams including Jacques Rougeau, Sr. and Jean “Johnny” Rougeau, Maurice “Mad Dog” Vachon and Walter “Killer” Kowalski, as well as Mad Dog Vachon with real life brother Paul “Butcher” Vachon. (The attentive reader will note that “Mad Dog,” “Killer,” and “Butcher” are slightly more intimidating names than Maurice, Walter, and Paul). Paul and Jos won tag team titles in both *Stampede Wrestling* and in the *International Wrestling Alliance* (Montreal). In 1971, Jos beat Johnny Rougeau for the International Heavyweight belt, his first singles title.

In addition to working singles matches against major stars like Bruno Sammartino and Ivan Koloff, Jos also did the gimmick where he would beat two men in a handicap match. One of these matches in 1970 was against Pat and Mike Kelly, whose real names were Viktor and William Arko. Seventeen years later, Pat and Mike would have a short, but memorable run in Memphis teaming with shaved heads as “The Clones.” Pat Kelly died in 1988 in the same car wreck that killed Adrian Adonis and Dave McKigney (Gene Dubois).

In later 1973, Canada invaded Florida. Paul and Jos picked up the Florida Tag Team titles in December. Frenchie Lamont (Roland Barriault) and Mad Dog Vachon also made the migration that winter. By April, Paul LeDuc was “injured” by Korean martial arts expert Pak Song and left the promotion. Jos stayed a bit longer, went back to Canada for a singles push, and then came back to Florida in the fall as a main event babyface. Florida would become his second home for the next several years.

Jos worked a series of gimmick matches against lead Florida heel Pak Song (Lumberjack matches and Steel Cage matches and Canadian Death contests, the latter presumably did not involve chugging maple syrup or Molson beer). Jos teamed with Dusty Rhodes, who in 1974 turned from a despised heel to the promotion’s top babyface, a slot he would hold until he left Florida in 1984. Other top heels he worked against included Bill Watts, Terry Funk, Toru Tanaka (Charles Kalani), Mike McCord (a.k.a., Austin Idol), and a man that would play a significant part in his career, Archie Gouldie – the Mongolian Stomper. He picked up the Florida Southern Heavyweight Title twice during this stretch.

Luckily, LeDuc survived this Florida run. According to Dusty Rhodes, an alcohol induced traveling incident started with Dusty playfully slapping Jos after a show. Jos was angered and responded by jumping on the hood of the car that Dusty and several other wrestlers were using. Dick Slater was behind the wheel and saw no problem with hitting the gas, despite having a new large angry Canadian hood ornament. Per Dusty, and take this with more than a few grains of salt, Slater got the car up to seventy miles per hour while LeDuc literally held on for dear life.

When the Florida run ended, Jos went to Texas, where he worked headline feuds with Blackjack Lanza (Jack Lanza) and Superstar Billy Graham (Wayne Coleman). He finished up in Texas in July and went to the AWA in August. He worked a match against Larry "The Ax" Henning which involved both men beating each other silly with no resolution. In the "if I can't beat them, I'll join them" tradition, the duo formed a tag team based on mutual respect for each other's toughness. They took on the Valiant Brothers in an extended feud, which culminated in the Valiants on the bag packing side of several "Losers Leave Town" matches. Henning and LeDuc then transitioned into an extended pairing against Mad Dog Vachon and Baron Von Raschke (James Raschke). While in the AWA, Jos performed one of the many feats of strength he would later become renowned for, pulling a city bus. This clip would be frequently used to display his power when he came into new territories.

LeDuc's next stop was in Georgia, where he worked against his former driving buddy Dick Slater and Pak Song. Jos teamed with the promotion's top babyfaces, Mr. Wresting II and Dusty Rhodes. He spent his last few months in the Georgia circuit working against the Mongolian Stomper, who was managed by James J. Dillon at the time.

In December of 1976, LeDuc returned to Florida, working as a babyface against Superstar Billy Graham and Ox Baker. The Graham feud lasted several months into 1977. On 30 April, 1977, Graham defeated Bruno Sammartino for the WWWF Championship, in a title change that shocked Bruno's legion of fans in the Northeast. In May, Graham was back in Florida, defending the belt against LeDuc.

LeDuc left Florida for Knoxville and had his most extensive feud with the Mongolian Stomper. Archie Gouldie grew up in Canada and became obsessed with wrestling to the point where he would go to matches and challenge the professionals. Stu Hart, who loved to teach novices about

wrestling the hard way, invited Gouldie into his famed “Dungeon,” the basement of his home where he would stretch any willing candidate. Stu would work over the uninitiated in an unmerciful fashion; his children became accustomed to hearing pitiful moans and horrific shrieks coming from downstairs. Most men would crawl away humiliated and never return, but Gouldie kept coming back for more punishment. After breaking into the business, he went to Kansas City and was given the Mongolian Stomper gimmick. His interviews, screaming rants about how he enjoyed both giving and receiving pain, along with his menacing ring persona drew big money. A young Bret Hart stayed awake at night, worried about the Stomper who had promised to tear his home apart, brick by brick. The Stomper worked as the lead heel in Memphis during the summer of 1975, even drawing several sellout crowds to the Mid-South Coliseum without Lawler on the cards.

The feud between LeDuc and the Stomper headlined in Knoxville throughout the latter half of 1977. A few tricks were used during this run that would be repeated in Memphis. LeDuc did the power display which involved a group of men tried to pull apart his interlocked hands. In Knoxville, five bodybuilders were strapped to each arm and could not break his bear hug hand lock. The Stomper then blasted him in the head with a metal garbage can, causing the hold to be released. He also did the blood oath in Knoxville as a deranged babyface. If he was willing to cut his own arm with an axe, just imagine what he would do to someone he hated. During one angle to keep the feud going, the Stomper broke a concrete block over LeDuc’s head with a sledge hammer. This, unsurprisingly, created a legitimate injury that hospitalized LeDuc. According to Robert Fuller, who was booking the territory at the time, LeDuc left the hospital without authorization during the next Knoxville card. Fuller was even more surprised than the fans when LeDuc, in an unscripted moment, got in the ring and verbally challenged the Stomper. Robert Fuller later credited LeDuc with getting him jobs as a booker in other territories, based upon the successful work LeDuc did in Knoxville during this feud. LeDuc also teamed with Bob Armstrong and worked against Mr. Knoxville (Ron Garvin) before leaving the territory.

Before ending his run in Knoxville, LeDuc made his first appearances in Memphis, destroying a few babyfaces that worked low in the cards. While he had primarily been a babyface since working in the States, the money in

Memphis would be against Lawler as a monster heel. Since Memphis was a small man's territory, LeDuc immediately stood out as menacing powerhouse.

He worked a main event against Lawler in March, which drew a respectable crowd of 5,416. The two were primarily kept apart from each other until the summer, when the promotion did its biggest business. He teamed with Sonny King (Larry Johnson) to take on Dundee and Valiant. A main event in April between those teams drew over 7,000. Lawler got into the mix in May working six man tags with Dundee and Valiant against LeDuc, John Louie (Canadian wrestler Neil Gay), and Sonny King.

During June, the extended main event program with Lawler began. It was during this timeframe when LeDuc held Lawler high in the air and, much like a grown man would toss a pillow, threw Lawler sailing above the top rope into the announcer's table. Lawler hit the table awkwardly, creating a huge gash in his leg. "The "King" was lying on the floor of the Coliseum and was informed that the heave was such a great visual that he shouldn't continue the match. Lawler thought that was good news, since he was actually injured and unable to continue. He was out of action for the next three weeks. A return match in July drew the biggest crowd for the feud with 8,896 fans in attendance. Since Lawler could not match LeDuc in terms of power, any victory would be by outsmarting his stronger foe. The promotion did the test of strength gimmick, where five men from Tupelo were strapped to each arm and tried to pry LeDuc's bear hug death grip apart. The tremendous upper body strength that had served him so well on Dick Slater's hood continued his winning streak in Tupelo.

On 5 August, Lawler busted LeDuc's head open at the studio wrestling, which led to the infamous blood oath interview. The next Monday night drew 8,764 fans that saw LeDuc beat Lawler for the Southern Heavyweight title. Lawler quickly won the title back and then brought in a new tag team partner to take on LeDuc and John Louie. Oddly enough, Lawler was teaming with the Mongolian Stomper. Of course, after a few weeks, the Stomper turned on Lawler, leading to a "Lights Out" no disqualification match that Lawler won. LeDuc ended his first run in Memphis working against Bill Dundee and teaming with Don Fargo against Jimmy Valiant and Wayne Farris.

LeDuc's time in Memphis was unforgettable. With his brute strength, the twitchy head with the repeated declaration of "I'm not crazy!" and, of

course, the blood oath, he was one of the most unique characters to ever work on the Memphis scene. His time in Memphis was also used for a major angle in Florida.

LeDuc had been a babyface in Florida since debuting there in 1973 and returned to the promotion in November of 1978. By that time, Sonny King had established himself as the lead heel manager for the promotion. After Leduc had been back in the promotion for a few months, Gordon Solie interviewed "rookie" Jimmy Garvin and noted some of the wrestlers that had assisted Garvin and included LeDuc in that list. Garvin shocked Solie by stating that Leduc was owned "body and soul" by Sonny King. A stunned Gordon Solie responded that he had never known Mr. Leduc to have any dealings with anyone like Sonny King.

LeDuc came out the following week and denied ever having anything to do with Sonny King. Garvin came out in a later interview segment, claiming he traveled to Memphis to obtain a copy of a video. The footage was shown of LeDuc tossing Lawler high over the ropes, which was followed by King giving LeDuc money for injuring Lawler. LeDuc continued, "What's in look like in de emergency room, Lawler? Ha, I've never been in a hospital." Solie responded with disbelief and LeDuc stormed onto the set and snatched Garvin into a bear hug. Solie pleaded for LeDuc to stop while Garvin bled from the mouth and was unable to defend himself. Sonny King then came out to calm LeDuc down. According to all accounts, everyone in the angle sold it beautifully, with Solie especially being shaken up by the events. A group of wrestling historians developed a list of the Top 25 Angles in the history of Florida wrestling and LeDuc's heel turn placed as the third best angle ever executed in the promotion.

As a heel, Leduc faced Killer Karl Kox, the Briscos, Billy Graham, Dusty Rhodes, Steve Keirn, and Mike Graham. Tag team partners included Bugsy McGraw (Michael Davis), Don Muraco, and King Curtis (Curtis Iaukea). LeDuc also continued to travel overseas, working tours for the *International Wrestling Enterprise* (IWE) in Japan and a tour in Singapore in 1981.

For the next few years, LeDuc settled into the Continental territory, owned by Robert Fuller. He did work a few shots against Lawler in 1981 and spent some time in Georgia as well. A 1981 appearance was an occasion for another memorable moment. Being interviewed at his "residence," LeDuc started talking calmly and became increasingly more agitated as he recalled his blood oath and his frustration that Lawler was still in wrestling. He

picked up a vase, noted, “I’ve got a maid, she can clean up,” and then broke the container over his head.

In Continental, he resumed his program with the Mongolian Stomper and also feuded with Don Carson as a babyface. As a heel, he worked with a second generation wrestling Rougeau, shaving Jacques’ head in a hot studio angle. He had a serious of extremely physical matches against Terry Gordy in 1982 and also had a program with Austin Idol.

He left Alabama in 1982 and went to the Mid-Atlantic Region, working programs with Jimmy Valiant, Dick Slater, and the One Man Gang (George Gray). He added the NWA TV Title to his collection of accomplishments during that run. In July of 1983, he was back in Florida, feuding with Barry Windham, or in LeDuc speak, “Bear Windham.”

In December of 1983, he returned to Memphis, teaming with Randy Savage against Lawler and Austin Idol. He interfered in a Savage/Lawler cage match, climbing up the extremely cheap looking structure with incredible ease for such a large man. He was also working in Atlanta against Buzz Sawyer at the time and that feud was brought into Memphis as well. During this run, James J. Dillon came into the area with the Zambuie Express (veteran workers Ray Candy and Leroy Brown with a newly found militant African heritage, working as Kareem Muhammad and Elijah Akeem). The Zambuie Express attacked Lawler and LeDuc in separate instances, requiring the arch rivals to team up. The teams were programmed against each other for three weeks, drawing crowds in the 5,500 range and then LeDuc turned on Lawler again. A match in April between LeDuc and Jimmy Hart against Lawler and Dillon drew 7,591 in attendance, the biggest night that LeDuc headlined during this run.

LeDuc had a few humorous moments that coincided with the departure of Steve Keirn and Stan Lane, the Fabulous Ones. After Lance Russell acknowledged that the Fabs had left the territory, a laughing, gloating LeDuc announced “The Fabs are gone!” However, the “b” in Fabs sounded very much like a “g.” In a funeral segment, where Jimmy Hart announced that the Bruise Brothers had died - the duo would be quickly reborn as “Jimmy Hart’s Fabulous Ones” - LeDuc creepily whispered beside a casket, “They were good wrestlers. They were champion material. Did you ever wonder…when your turn…was coming? Now, get out of here.”

LeDuc left Memphis and did a tour of *All Japan Pro Wrestling*, teaming with Stan Hansen and Bruiser Brody, two men considered all time legends

in that wrestling obsessed nation. That summer he returned to Canada, first working in Nova Scotia against Archie Gouldie/the Mongolian Stomper, then moving to Gino Brito's Montreal based *International Wrestling*. Montreal was drawing huge crowds at the time (from 15,000 to 19,500 fans) and LeDuc was involved in major feuds with Abdullah the Butcher and King Tonga (Tonga Fifita, better known as Haku). In 1985, LeDuc partnered with Dino Bravo (Adolfo Bresciano) against the Road Warriors and took a pile driver on the concrete floor of the arena. He then turned heel on Bravo, accusing Dino of letting him down, and teamed with Abdullah the Butcher against Jacques and Raymond Rougeau. (Dino Bravo allegedly became involved with an organized crime group in Montreal after leaving wrestling and was murdered in 1993).

In 1986, after a tour in Puerto Rico, LeDuc came back to Memphis, but was used primarily as a mid card performer. In his most high profile matches, he teamed alternately with Jeff Jarrett and Lawler in matches against Dundee and Buddy Landel. He also teamed up with Paul Diamond (Tom Boric) to form the Canadian Connection, but Diamond wasn't suitably excited about wearing flannel and shaving his hair to look like LeDuc. Joe, not pleased, blindsided him and cut his hair for him, starting a new program.

In 1988, LeDuc popped up in the WWF, working low on the cards, beating Lanny Poffo, Sam Houston (Michael Smith), and Scott Casey. He also did a televised job for Tito Santana. Bret Hart thought that LeDuc ended his WWF run prematurely by trying to keep up on the party scene with the Dynamite Kid (Tom Billington).

His last appearances were in June of 1995, doing nostalgia matches in Memphis and Louisville against Lawler. Jim Cornette booked him into *Smoky Mountain Wrestling* in November of 1995, as a nostalgic nod to his well remembered feud with the Stomper back in 1977, but LeDuc cancelled due to illness.

LeDuc passed away on 1 May, 1999, in Atlanta, Georgia. His legacy is somewhat undervalued, since he wasn't a major player once national expansion of wresting started. However, in the territorial days, he drew huge money in several different promotions, both as a heel and a babyface. And, he wasn't crazy.

Austin Idol

"The women's pet, the men's regret."

Definitions of "charisma" include "a special quality or power of an individual making him capable of influencing or inspiring large numbers of people" or as "a special magnetic charm or appeal." In the history of Memphis wrestling, few performers defined charisma more than the Universal Heartthrob, Austin Idol. Reflecting on his astounding interview skills, Austin once remarked, "I knew when that red light comes on, it's show time."

When the red light wasn't on, wrestlers had different motivations for being in the business. Some performers loved the fame (Jerry Lawler), some were attracted to the partying lifestyle (Tommy Rich), and some loved the sense of adventure (Dutch Mantell). For Dennis McCord, the wrestling business was all about business. His relentless financial focus, coupled with his intense desire to protect the "Austin Idol" character, did not always endear McCord to his fellow performers or wrestling promoters.

As a teenager in Tampa, Florida, Dennis McCord was a high school baseball star and developed an interest in bodybuilding at a young age. He met Mike Graham, the son of Florida wrestling star and promoter Eddie Graham, at a Tampa gym and started training with veterans Bob Roop and Hiro Matsuda. He debuted on the Florida circuit in 1972, working under his real name. At the time, McCord weighed over 300 pounds, had short brown hair, and had the physique of a heavyweight power lifter. He worked low on the cards in Florida until May of 1972, then had a short run working in Knoxville and Chattanooga, Tennessee. While in Florida, McCord had met Jerry Brisco, who invited him to work in the Carolinas. The rookie got his first real push in the Carolinas, working his way up the cards to team with Nelson Royal (Nelson Combs) to take on the established lead heel team of the territory, Gene and Ole Anderson (Alan Rogowski). Royal and McCord also faced the Australian cousins known as the Royal Kangaroos, comprised of future Sheepherder Lord Jonathan Boyd (Jonathan Boyle) and Norman Frederick Charles III (Norman Lowndes).

McCord was entering the Carolinas territory at the same time that Gary Hart (Gary Williams) was leaving the territory to work for Jim Barnett in Australia. Hart invited McCord to work in the "Land of Oz" and McCord picked up his first title in the territory, teaming with Jimmy Golden to win

the Austra-Asian Tag Team belts in December of 1972. Idol would later state that he learned ring psychology while working in Australia, with particularly kind words for Mark Lewin. After finishing his run in Australia, Barnett got McCord booked into the WWWF, where his ring name was changed from Dennis McCord to “Iron” Mike McCord. McCord was welcomed into the WWWF locker room by “King” Curtis Iaukea with a big hug. The men had worked together in Australia and having the acceptance of Iaukea helped ease McCord into the new work environment. “Iron” Mike was soon paired up with manager Captain Lou Albano and received several shots for the WWWF title against champion Pedro Morales. Idol would later state that he learned how to give interviews from Captain Lou and also learned how to project complete confidence in front of the camera. In addition to working singles matches, McCord also teamed with Blackjack Lanza to take on Tony Garea (Anthony Garcia) and Haystacks Calhoun. (William Calhoun, a native of McKinney, Texas, was given an Arkansas hillbilly gimmick and was billed as weighing over 600 pounds. Calhoun toured throughout the world as a babyface special attraction in the 1960s and early 1970s, similar to the role that Andre the Giant would play in the late 1970s and early 1980s). McCord teamed with both Blackjack Lanza and Stan Stasiak (George Stipich) in bouts against Andre the Giant and Jay Strongbow.

Dennis McCord had been in the wrestling business for less than two years and he was working as one of the top heels in one of the most profitable promotions in the country, often working against the biggest stars in the business. According to the future Austin Idol, he woke up one day during the winter of 1973 and decided that his native Tampa blood and the Connecticut ice were not a winning combination. He gave Vince McMahon, Sr. his notice and left one of the top slots in the business for the warmth of the Florida sun.

After a hiatus of several months, McCord returned to the ring in the summer of 1974, not as Dennis or “Iron” Mike McCord, but as the masked “Super A.” Working in Georgia with Ole and Gene Anderson, the trio took on Don Muraco, Wrestling #1 (Tim Woods) and the Professional. (The Professional was one of the personas of Omaha native Doug Gilbert, whose real name was Doug Lindzy; he was not related to the Memphis Gilbert family.) During interviews, Ole would put over the “24 inch arms” and “52 inch chest” of Super A, who would flex in the background. Of course, the

Andersons being the Andersons, they quickly turned on “Super A” and unmasked him, which meant little to the fans since McCord was an unknown entity in the territory.

In September of 1974, McCord returned to Florida wrestling, with no major push. For the most part, he was working low on the cards, losing to Tony Parisi (Antonio Pugliese), Bob Roop, Bob Armstrong, and Dominic DeNucci. He did work in a semifinal match, teaming with Bill Watts against Dusty Rhodes and Jos LeDuc in November of 1974. The main event that night was a sixty minute draw between NWA Champion Jack Brisco and Dory Funk, Jr., in what was most assuredly a fantastic contest. His life would be permanently and drastically changed in February of the next year.

On February 20th, 1975, *Championship Wrestling from Florida* held a card at the Convention Hall in Miami. After the matches, pilot/wrestler Buddy Colt, Gary Hart, Bobby Shane, and McCord boarded Buddy Colt’s Cessna 173, also known as “The Bad Guy’s Plane,” for a return flight to Tampa. Due to closing fog, Colt was flying with limited visibility. Flying in and out of clouds, Colt missed the runway. McCord screamed, “We are going to hit the water!” and he was correct in his assessment. Bobby Shane (Robert Schoenberger), the man that gave Jerry Lawler his first crown and recommended the team of George Barnes and Bill Dundee to Jerry Jarrett, died upon impact. Gary Hart, Buddy Colt, and McCord made it to shore. Gary Hart, covered in blood and with a broken back, went to the nearest home for assistance. The owner’s response to the hated heel manager’s plea was, “If you don't get off of this property, I will call the police."

Buddy Colt (Ron Read) suffered severe injuries from the crash and never wrestled again, but stayed in the business working as a manager, referee, and color commentator. Dennis McCord had broken ribs, two broken ankles, and, as a result of not wearing shoes, received deep cuts in the bottom of his feet. On October 4, 1975, another major plane crash happened in the Carolinas that involved promoter David Crockett and wrestlers Johnny Valentine (John Wisniski), Bob Bruggers, Ric Flair, and Mr. Wrestling #1 (Tim Woods, whose real name was George Woodin). While the plane was going down, Tim Woods recalled a conversation with McCord concerning how badly McCord’s feet were hurt. Woods, who wasn’t wearing shoes, quickly grabbed the pilot’s briefcase and placed it under his feet for extra protection. Bruggers, Flair, and Valentine all had their backs broken from the crash and, of those three, only Flair would

return to the ring. Woods was working as a babyface and the perception within the territory was that business would have been hurt immeasurably if the public knew he was traveling with the trio of heels. “Mr. Wresting #1” checked under the hospital under his real name and stated to the hospital staff that he was a promoter. When fans began to speculate that he was on the plane, although seriously banged up, he returned to the ring two weeks after the crash.

Shockingly, “Mike” McCord was back in the rings approximately four months after the Florida plane crash, returning in June of 1975 to *Georgia Championship Wrestling*. McCord generally worked low on the cards, facing Billy Spears, Butch Malone (Bill Crouch), Mr. Fuji (Harry Fujiwara), and a wrestler that was in Jerry Jarrett’s dog house, Jerry Lawler. He did work a mid-card feud against Nikolia Volkoff (Josip Nikolai Peruzović), who was being managed by fellow plane crash survivor Gary Hart. “Iron” Mike McCord finished up in Georgia in September of 1975. It was time for a change.

Dennis McCord was out of the business until the summer of 1977. During this time away from the ring, he started a new health program and lost approximately 100 pounds. He went from a super heavyweight to a well-toned, muscular physique. He had the type of body that wasn’t the norm before the steroid era hit wrestling in the 1980s. However, when he returned to his “home” territory in Florida, he did not receive a major push. He hit the road in 1978, but he was no longer known as “Iron” Mike McCord. Austin Idol, the Universal Heartthrob, with bleached blonde hair, flashy clothes, and charisma for miles was ready for business.

Well, almost ready for business. When Idol appeared in Texas, he discovered that he was booked as “Often Idle.” When he asked Gary Hart about it, Gary said, “That’s the name you told me over the phone.” One might suspect that Gary was having a bit of fun with his fellow plane crash survivor. Idol worked as a mid-card heel in Texas, working for promoters Fritz Von Erich and Paul Boesch. Opponents included Tiger Conway, Jr., Jose Lothario (Guadalupe Robledo), Pepper Gomez, Ivan Putski, Nick Kozak, and future Freebird Buddy Roberts, working as Dale Valentine. After a few months in Dallas, Idol left after a pay dispute with Fritz Von Erich. He then left for a shorter run in Portland, which Idol later called a “horrible experience,” finding the small territory not serious about drawing money. Idol also made several appearances in Detroit in late 1978, working

for Ed Farhat (“The Sheik”). Idol later remembered that he had to “fight for his money” in the promotion, but spoke highly about performing in Cobo Hall. While working out in a Tampa gym, Idol met Rocky Johnson, who strongly encouraged Idol to go to Memphis. The Universal Heartthrob debuted in Memphis on 11 December, 1978, defeating Robert Gibson. On Christmas night, Idol defeated Jerry Lawler for the Southern Heavyweight Title.

In January, Lawler was hospitalized due to “passing blood” after a match with Idol. Lawler, making the most out of the injury, told the local newspaper, “I thought I was dying.” Lawler returned the ring on 21 January, beating Idol in front of 5, 118 fans. A bizarre match was booked the next week, as Mexican babyface legend Mil Mascaras (Aaron Rodríguez) was brought in as a heel in his only Memphis appearance, tagging with Idol against Lawler and Jackie Fargo in a stretcher match, which bumped the crowed up to 6,874. Idol stayed on the top of the cards, drawing over 7,000 fans for a main event against Bill Dundee in March and leaving town after losing a cage match against Lawler on 16 April, drawing 6,319. While his run had not been a long one in Memphis, “Idol-mania” had been established – Austin Idol had been a dependable drawing card and an excellent opponent for Lawler.

However, signs that he could be difficult to work with also appeared. According to Bill Dundee, at one point Idol was unhappy with booker Robert Fuller and announced that The Universal Heartthrob would be walking through the crowd and then leaving, without performing. This was an old trick that undercompensated or unhappy wrestlers had often used to embarrass promotions. Fuller quickly replied that he would send Buzz Sawyer out to break Idol’s leg if such an attempt were made. Mr. McCord decided that discretion was the better part of valor that evening.

After leaving Memphis, Idol went to the Alabama territory, where he would work often throughout the 1980s. Idol worked a feud against Terry Boulder (Hulk Hogan), who had already worked a main event in the territory against Andre the Giant (André René Roussimoff) , a pairing which would do record business in the WWF at WrestleMania III, almost eight years later. (Hulk’s payday against Andre was probably a bit better for the WrestleMania pay per view event at Pontiac Stadium than it was at the television taping in Dothan, Alabama in 1979.) Idol defeated Hogan for the Southeastern title and also “blinded” Hogan with a flash camera, costing the

Hulkster a chance to best Harley Race for the N.W.A. World Heavyweight Title. Idol would later note that “Hulkamania” was a phrase that Hogan adopted from “Idol-mania,” and that he recommended that Hogan refer to his arms as “pythons.”

At this point, Idol had spent over a year developing his new persona and working in a number of territories. In July of 1979, he returned to *Georgia Championship Wrestling*, where he had worked years before as “Super A” and “Iron” Mike McCord. In addition to his new persona, Georgia wrestling was now benefitting from increased exposure through WTBS. The Universal Heartthrob was about to make a significant impact on wrestling’s most viewed promotion.

Idol started in the territory under the management of Bobby Heenan, teaming with Killer Karl Kox (Herb Gerwig). The duo worked tag team matches against Bob Armstrong and Stan Hansen. Idol then worked a singles program with Armstrong, in a contest between the down home Georgia good ol’ boy and the flashy Las Vegas heel. Idol worked some interesting matches in October and November - teaming with the equally flashy “Superstar” Billy Graham to face Tony Atlas and Tommy Rich in Atlanta; working in single matches against Bret Hart and Buzz Sawyer; and teaming with “Sterling Golden” (another pseudonym for Terry Bollea, better known as Hulk Hogan) to take on Stan Hansen and Ray Candy (Ray Canty).

In late November of 1979, Idol began a feud with Tommy Rich for the Georgia Heavyweight Title. The chemistry worked, as the fans loved the humble, hard charging “Wildfire” and hated the cocky “Universal Heartthrob.” Idol also picked up the Georgia Tag Team titles in November, pairing with the Masked Superstar (Bill Eadie) to take the belts from the Crusher (Reggie Lisowski) and Tommy Rich. Austin would “injure” Rich’s knee in the feud and also teamed with Harley Race to attack Rich, in an effort to keep Tommy from gaining the NWA World Heavyweight Title. Idol also added the Georgia Television title to his trophy collection. On Christmas of 1979, Idol faced “this kid” Ric Flair in Atlanta in an event that ended as a “no contest” decision.

In addition to giving uniformly superlative interviews in his entirely self absorbed persona, another element that added to Idol’s success was the contrast between him and Gordon Solie. Solie, the Walter Cronkite of professional wrestling, always maintained a weighty, dead serious

approach. He couldn't have been more offended by an underhanded heel like Idol. Idol would also feud against Mr. Wrestling II, whom he labeled "an escaped convict" due to his mask. Idol further enraged Georgia fans by having a fake Mr. Wrestling II submit to his "Las Vegas leg lock."

Idol worked a major feud with Kevin Sullivan, with the babyface Sullivan winning a series of "Boston Street Fight" matches. The men also worked lumberjack matches and cage matches. Based on his exposure on WTBS, Idol was brought into Madison Square Garden to work a match on February 18th, 1980, beating perennial jobber Jose Estrada. By May, Idol had been pairing with Baron Von Raschke (James Raschke) and a split between the two turned Idol into a babyface. Idol thought that the turn was executed much too quickly. At the time, Austin seemed much more comfortable in the pretentious heel mode. It's hard to talk about one's sultry lips as a babyface, but he tried. Idol then worked a series of matches against Abdullah the Butcher.

A wrestling story of legend occurred with Idol during this timeframe in Columbus, Georgia. Idol was booked to work a battle royal for promoter Fred Ward, who the Heartthrob considered a "consummate thief." After winning the batter royal, much to his surprise, he was presented a check to "Austin Idol" in the amount of $5,000. Generally, a fake check would be presented to a battle royal winner and then retrieved immediately after the winner returned to the dressing room. Idol later cashed the check, much to the shock and dismay of Fred Ward and much to the delight of his fellow workers, who loved seeing one of the boys get the best of a promoter. Future bookings into Columbus, Georgia, a regular stop on the Georgia circuit, were marked by considerable tension.

Idol's time in Georgia crossed into the popular culture when comedian Darryl Rhoades constructed an ode to Idol. Using the name Chip Taylor and the Idolators (sic), Rhoades performed "Heart Throb," using the tune of the Troggs' classic "Wild Thing." The schlocky single (with the lyrics "Heart throb/Will the body of Apollo and the mind of Einstein/He's the hero and you're the zero" and a promo by the great man himself) even made an appearance on the nationally syndicated Dr. Demento radio program.

In July of 1980, Idol returned to Memphis partnering with "Dirty" Dutch Mantell. The duo debuted against CWA "World Tag Team" Champions Tojo Yamamoto and Jerry Jarrett and, while not the main event, Idol's return probably contributed to the attendance figure of 8,114, which was

one of the largest crowds while Lawler was out of action in 1980. The next week Mantell and Idol won the belts. The titles were put on the shelf when Idol did a tour of Japan in August and September. Idol returned in October, beating Billy Robinson for the CWA "World Heavyweight" Title in front of a relatively small crowd (slightly over 2,500 in attendance) at the Tim McCarver baseball stadium. Idol lost the title to Bobby Eaton two weeks later, forfeiting due to an "injury."

In November of 1980, Idol returned to Georgia and teamed with his former foe Kevin Sullivan in an angle against the Fabulous Freebirds that is still fondly remembered by wrestling fans. Sullivan and Mike Davis were scheduled to wrestle the Freebirds for the Georgia Tag Team Titles with Idol as a special referee. Sullivan repeatedly asked Solie to delay the match, because Idol was running late. Michael Hayes kept appearing, stating that Idol was not going to show up and even presented a telegram where Idol apologized to the Freebirds for getting involved with their matches. Sullivan insisted that Idol would appear, but Gordon Solie remained skeptical. The match eventually took place without Idol, ending with Terry Gordy giving Mike Davis a vicious powerbomb (years before that move was regularly used in wrestling). After the match, Idol showed up and Hayes looked completely stunned by his appearance. Idol acted as though nothing of importance happened and was completely in his "Heartthrob" persona. After noting that he was a few minutes late due to a flat tire, Hayes responded, "I guess it would take some time to fix *four flat tires*." Whoops. Hayes had spilled the beans. A wild melee ensued. However, after the hot angle, Idol did not like the direction of the program (i.e., didn't want to do jobs to the Freebirds) and soon left the territory.

Idol split his time in January of 1981 between the Alabama and Memphis promotions. On January 12th, 1980, he worked a main event against Lawler who had just returned a few weeks prior from his broken leg. A crowd of almost 6,000 fans saw Lawler defeat Idol, with the stipulation that Lawler would receive Jimmy Hart's gold record for "Keep on Dancing" if "The King" won. After winning the match, Lawler tossed the gold record into the Mississippi River. The next night, Idol worked a Texas death match in Mobile, Alabama against Ron Bass.

Idol returned to Memphis in February and it was at this point that he and Lawler did the Diamante Negro angle, a replication of an angle that Jody

Hamilton and Dusty Rhodes had done in Florida. Idol appeared as a masked Mexican wrestler, sent to present Lawler with “the most popular wrestler of the year” award from south of the border. Lawler was given a goofy sombrero to wear as Diamante yelled, “Numero uno!” Of course, the plaque for the award ending up being busted over Lawler’s head. An excited Lance Russell instructed Hector Guerrero during the attack, “Tell him in Mexican to just get out of here.” Later in February, Idol renewed his partnership with Dutch Mantell to take on Lawler and Jackie Fargo. On March 9th, 1981, a main event with Idol and Mantell defending their CWA “World Tag Team” titles against Bill Dundee and Tommy Rich drew 7,916. Idol made a few more appearances in Memphis during April, but was also involved in a short interesting chapter in Florida wrestling history.

Boris Malenko (Lawrence Simon) was a major star in Florida in the 1960s and 1970s, but had a falling out with promoter Eddie Graham. Malenko, Louie Tillet, and wrestler/promoter Don Curtis opened *Sun Belt* wrestling to compete with Eddie Graham’s established promotion. Austin Idol and Jimmy Valiant were booked to be the top stars of the new territory. Jerry Jarrett, who had a strong personal relationship with Graham, called Valiant and asked him to move to another territory. Idol may have received a call as well. In April he was working a main event program with Boris Malenko in Jacksonville. By May, the Universal Heartthrob was in the Carolinas.

Idol spent the better part of a year in the Carolinas. He was put over quickly, defeating Ricky Steamboat (Richard Blood) and the Masked Superstar in May. Occasionally, he would work shots for the expanded Georgia territory, for example, teaming with Ted DiBiase to take on the Freebirds in Columbus, Ohio. Idol worked extended programs with Ron Bass and Paul Jones and would occasionally work in main events. In June of 1981, he teamed with Jimmy Valiant to take on the Masked Superstar and his Georgia nemesis, Mr. Wrestling II in a main event in Charleston, South Carolina. Later that month, he teamed with Roddy Piper in Richmond, Virginia to take on Dusty Rhodes and Wahoo McDaniel. Idol also returned to Georgia for a few shots in November, teaming with Terry Gordy against Gordy’s former and future Freebird partner Michael Hayes and Big Red (Jerry Reese). Late in 1981, Idol teamed with the Super Destroyer (Scott Irwin), taking on Ron Bass and Leroy Brown. On Christmas of 1981, Idol defeated Michael Hayes in the Omni and that feud was extended to the Carolinas with Hayes teaming with Jimmy Valiant to

take on Terry Gordy and Idol. Idol left the Carolinas in the spring of 1982. While he wasn't promoted as one of the top stars in a territory that included Ric Flair, Ricky Steamboat, Roddy Piper, and Wahoo McDaniel, he did maintain a good slot for his run.

In May of 1982, Idol returned to Ron Fuller's *Continental Championship Wrestling*. Idol teamed with Robert Fuller to take on the Sheepherders, sometimes working as the masked "Mr. Las Vegas." He then transitioned into a main event feud with Jos LeDuc and worked a program with Wayne Farris for the Alabama title. Another frequent opponent was Alabama mainstay Bob Armstrong, with stipulations such as "I Quit" matches and lumberjack matches. In April of 1983, Idol began an extended program with the Mongolian Stomper (Archie Gouldie) and worked a title match against Ric Flair in May.

Idol had also returned to Memphis in March of 1983, as the newly crowned "International Heavyweight Champion," a belt theoretically won from Terry Funk in Japan. He defended the belt against Lawler on 1 March and Lawler guaranteed he would win the belt the next week in less than five minutes or refund the price of admission to every fan. Unsurprisingly, Lawler won in less than five minutes, then hit Idol with a fire ball for good measure. In a bizarre bit of wrestling logic, Idol reflected upon this loss and "saw the light." When Idol returned to Memphis in June, he was now a babyface teaming with Lawler to take on Ken Patera and Man Mountain Link (Rick Link) in a cage match. The card, which also featured the Moondogs taking on the Fabulous Ones in a cage, drew almost 7,000 fans. A July main event with Lawler against the Bruise Brothers (Troy Graham and Porkchop Cash) drew 6,790. In August, the duo bested the Assassins (Roger Smith and Don Bass) for the "World Tag Team" titles. Lawler put over his new partner by stating that he didn't think any two men in wrestling could beat "The King" and "The Heartthrob." Lawler beamed as he stood by Idol, listening to his incomparable interviews.

In September, Idol bested Ken Patera for the International belt. Idol then worked a series of matches against Stan Hansen, who seemed to think every contest was a shoot. In 2011, when asked why his stay in Memphis was so short, Hansen somewhat jokingly replied, "Because I beat the hell out of Austin Idol." He then quickly added that he deserved to be fired. Before the end of the year, Idol was teamed again with Dutch Mantell, once again

winning the “World Tag Team” straps. Idol also made several appearances in St. Louis in late 1983.

In January of 1984, Lawler and Idol teamed to defeat Ken Patera and Crusher Blackwell. A January match against the Road Warriors drew 7,734 fans to the Coliseum. Idol and “The King” defeated the painted/spiked duo the next week, drawing over 6,500 fans. Idol worked extended programs against up and coming stars Ric Rude (Richard Rood), Randy Savage, and Jim Neidhart, generally working in the semi-final match. He was clearly established as the number two star in the promotion.

The feud with the Road Warriors went beyond Memphis as Idol and Lawler faced Hawk and Animal in Atlanta and Cleveland during April of 1984 and in Baltimore in June. A June 25th match in Memphis against the Road Warriors drew over 10,000 fans. Idol left on a high note, returning for another extended run in Alabama. Wrestling fans often wonder why Idol didn’t go to the WWF in the 1980s, since he had the type of look and charisma that would seem to perfectly fit the Vince McMahon, Jr. mold. However, the WWF wrestlers worked an insane schedule at that time, so extreme that even former *National Wrestling Alliance* World Heavyweight Champions Jack Brisco and Terry Funk both quit due to exhaustion. Idol could work three days a week for Jerry Jarrett or Ron Fuller and make a good income while doing it. He also had much more control over how his character was portrayed. Idol never considered the WWF as a viable option.

Austin returned to Alabama and was booked in a feud with Rip Rogers (Mark Sciarra), who he beat in a cage match in Birmingham in August. He then had a lengthy feud with Alabama mainstay Jimmy Golden, which included an angle where Idol was “attacked” at a gas station near the studio by Ron Fuller and Golden. (In 1984, wrestling film crews did not wait around filling stations, anticipating attacks on babyfaces whose cars had been tampered with, so only the post attack Idol interview was aired). The program with Golden lasted for several months, with Idol sometimes teaming with Mr. Olympia (Jerry Stubbs) to take on Golden and a young Arn Anderson. Idol then transitioned to a program with Lord Humongous, with Jeff Van Camp portraying the hockey masked wearing terror. Later, a young Sid Vicious would work the same gimmick in Memphis and in Alabama. Idol also worked a few shots against N.W.A. World Heavyweight Champion Ric Flair during this time; the same “kid” he had faced in Georgia in 1979.

Austin returned to Memphis in May of 1985 to assist Jerry Lawler in downing the team of Bruiser Brody and Kareem Muhammad (Ray Candy). Idol finished up in Alabama in July of 1985 and then reformed his team with Lawler to work a main event program in Memphis against the Freebirds (Michael Hayes and Terry Gordy). However, Idol only stayed in Memphis for a few weeks. The feud lost a bit of its luster when Idol was replaced in the program with Memphis mainstay Phil Hickerson. Idol returned to Memphis in December, teaming with Lawler to take the Southern tag team belts from Dutch Mantell and Bill Dundee.

1986 was an interesting year for Idol. He started the year working occasional shots in Memphis, taking on Bill Dundee for the Southern Heavyweight title. However, with Lawler out of action and Dundee doing the booking, Idol was not significantly featured in the territory. He spent several months working in the San Antonio based *Texas All-Star Wrestling* promotion. At the beginning of the 1980s, Joe Blanchard had secured on a cable slot on the USA Network for his *Southwest Championship Wrestling*, featuring his son Tully Blanchard and other stars such as Wahoo McDaniel and Bob Sweetan. Jerry Lawler and Nick Bockwinkel also appeared for the promotion. However, after losing their television slot the promotion began to fade and was taken over by Fred Behrend. The group basically survived as a small independent league. Idol headlined for the group for several months in 1986 after winning the "Texas All Star USA" Heavyweight title. Opponents included The Tonga Kid (Sam Fatu, the brother of Samoan wresters "Umaga" and "Rikishi," whose real names were Eddie and Solofa Fatu), Scott Casey, Kareem Mohammed (Ray Candy), and Al Madril. There was a significant pipeline between Memphis and San Antonio in 1986, as Paul Diamond, Fred Ottman ("Big Bubba," later "Typhoon"), Jonathon Boyd, and Billy Travis all appeared in both promotions.
In addition to appearing in *Texas All-Star Wrestling,* Idol made a few appearances in Fritz Von Erich's *World Class Championship Wrestling* in January of 1986, worked in Angelo Savoldi's *International Championship Wrestling* (teaming with "Jumpin'" Joe Savoldi facing Kevin Sullivan and Mark Lewin on one card), and even made one appearance in Montreal, teaming up Rick Martel. Idol made several more appearances in Memphis later in 1986, however, after appearing in the city for more than eight years,

his biggest run in the promotion and one of the greatest feuds in Memphis wrestling history was about to get underway.

Tommy Rich had returned to the promotion as a babyface and started a heel turn in December, upset that he was not getting a title shot at AWA World Heavyweight Champion Nick Bockwinkel. While the AWA had been steadily losing footing as a major promotion since the *World Wrestling Federation* started expansion in 1984, Bockwinkel was a superlative performer and Jerry Jarrett as a booker had always emphasized the importance of the world title. Rich and Lawler had wrestled in December with the winner to receive a title match. After the match was stopped due to bleeding, Rich was indignant, giving a great interview about how he had been bleeding when he beat Harley Race for the NWA World title and hinting that referee Jerry Calhoun and Lawler were working together against him.

On 4 January 1987, Lawler had his title match. After Bockwinkel and Lawler entered the ring, Idol came to the ring and announced that he wanted a title shot. He requested a match with Lawler to determine who would face Bockwinkel. When Lawler refused, Idol started to walk out of the ring, reversed course, and, proving that he was neither shucking nor jiving, blasted Lawler with a punch that Lawler sold like it had come out of a cannon. After almost four years of being a top babyface in the promotion and often working as Lawler's partner, the Memphis fans were stunned. Lawler went on to work a sixty minute draw with Bockwinkel, who could not put the shell-shocked King down for the count.

On 11 January, Lawler decided to take on both Rich and Idol in separate events to end the situation between all three. He wrestled Rich first and was disqualified after tossing a fireball at Tommy. At the end of the Idol match, Rich returned and a stunning sequence was executed. Both men stood outside the ring, grabbed one leg, and rammed Lawler aggressively into the ring post, the crown jewels taking the brunt of the blow. While Lawler was doubled in pain, Idol grabbed his head and delivered a humiliating insult to injury slap. Memphis wrestling fans had seen a lot of physical situations before, but had never seen a wrestler get posted in this matter. Nothing could have appeared to have been more painful. Idol worked as the top heel for weeks while Lawler was "injured" (the injury angle was used so Lawler could take time off for elective surgery), picking up the Southern

heavyweight title in the process. Tommy Rich became Idol's partner in crime and gave tremendous heel interviews during the feud.

On 16 February, Lawler returned with a surprising partner, Nick Bockwinkel. Although Lawler and Bockwinkel had battled for years, the AWA champion was do disgusted by the behavior of Idol and Rich that he agreed to assist Lawler. Their first match drew 9,000 fans. In March, Bam Bam Bigelow replaced Bockwinkel as Lawler's partner. While Bockwinkel was a versatile performer, Bigelow was a better fit for the insane brawling matches that fit this feud. On March 9, the four men drew 8,000 to the Coliseum. Before a "Texas Death Match" on 23 March, Lawler promised that either Rich or Idol was going to the hospital. After another frenzied brawl that involved a liberal amount of weapons, Tommy Rich was posted repeatedly by Lawler and Bigelow. Rich was "injured" (or taking time off for a tour of Japan).

It was during this timeframe that a young Paul Heyman entered the territory, where he was billed as both Paul E. Dangerously and Paul E. Dangerly. In separate instances when reflecting about that time period, Heyman has noted that "Austin Idol was…the greatest interview I ever saw." However, he also noted the tension that Idol created by "asking for his daily raise."

Idol and Lawler continued to work on top. This built to a cage match on 27 April where Lawler's hair was at stake. Idol guaranteed a refund to every fan if he lost. As the match concluded, a ref bump taken by Jerry Calhoun left him unable to count a pinfall for Lawler. At that time, Tommy Rich came out from under the ring and the two men hit Lawler with a stuffed pile driver and posted "The King" again. The fans were apoplectic as Idol, Rich, and Paul E. Dangerously gleefully celebrated in the ring, while Lawler's head was "shaved" (he actually received a short hair cut from his personal stylist). One fan tried to scale the cage to take on the heels and Rich encouraged more to follow. The heels literally had to run threw a throng of fans while security ran the gauntlet with them. Idol later reflected that the fans probably would have killed Idol and "Wildfire" if they could have got to them that evening (that is to say, the Heartthrob feared cardiac arrest). Idol capped off the night with another tremendous interview, talking about Tommy Rich being his "ace in the hole." Rich, for his part, had been put under the ring during the afternoon with an air mattress and some liquid

refreshments. It was one of the most memorable nights in the history of Memphis wrestling.

The cage match drew a crowd of 8,500. The next week, with Lawler off the card, Idol and Rich faced Bill Dundee and Rocky Johnson. Coming off the searing heat from the week before, they drew 9,000 fans, the largest crowd of the decade for a King-less card. Lawler returned on 25 May, drawing 8,500 while working the main event with Rich. The feud was officially ended on 15 June that had a "scaffold match" where nobody fell off the scaffold. Heyman, fearing injury without compensation, refused to get on the structure. Rich received a "broken wrist" after the match. Idol, who had reportedly refused to work the cage match in April until he received a significant pay increase for the night, was quickly phased out of the promotion. The program won the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* award for "Feud of the Year" and was in some respects the last great territorial feud in wrestling (one that had participants that the fans considered major stars and drew significant money). Memphis wrestling would never see that type of heat and energy again.

Idol began to phase out of the business as a regular performer after this run. He did work a program with Eddie Gilbert in Alabama in 1988 that drew some successful houses. Ironically, the key angle of the feud was over the AWA title, at this point being held by Jerry Lawler. While Idol had Lawler in a figure four, the local hero about to win the championship, Gilbert interfered and hit Idol with a fireball. Of course, Gilbert did not stay in the territory long and there were no other performers to work with to draw money.

Idol would occasionally come in for Memphis cards in 1989 and during the early 1990s. He was reportedly offered a job in *World Championship Wrestling* in 1990 by Ole Anderson. In 1992, Idol had the lead on running a new Alabama company called *USA Wrestling*. Idol was the top babyface, working with Iron Sheik as the lead heel. Other wrestlers in the company included Bob Armstrong (Joseph James), Scott and Steve Armstrong (Joseph James, Jr. and Steve James), Joey Maggs (Joseph Magliano), Wendell Cooley (Rick Casey), Boris Zhukov (Jim Barrell), and the Junkyard Dog. The promotion died after approximately two months. On March 7, 1994, he was a key figure in the "Memphis Memories" card, a nostalgia night for Memphis wrestling that drew over 8,300 fans.

The “Austin Idol” character was put on the shelf in the mid-1990s and Dennis McCord stayed out of the wrestling business for years, reportedly doing very well in the home remodeling/resell industry. In the past few years, he has resurfaced, participating in wrestling conventions, running for Mayor in the city of Tampa, and working on other online business ventures. He has remained in tremendous shape and has seen no loss in the charisma department. He is still twisted steel and sex appeal, darlin’.

Jimmy Hart

"This is the greatest day of my life, Lance Russell."

Very few cities can match Memphis for its rich culture in American music. W.C. (William Charles) Handy established jazz inspired blues as a contemporary art form on Beale Street in the early 1900s. Memphis became the regional focal point for Delta blues from the 1920s through the 1940s with a variety of artists including Sleepy John Estes, Frank Stokes, Memphis Minnie (who performed "When the Levee Breaks" in 1929, a song that Led Zeppelin covered in the 1970s), and B.B. King. The Memphis Jug Band often played in city parks, entertaining crowds with homemade instruments such as washboards and kazoos, while passing around the tip jar.

In 1950, Sam Phillips opened the Memphis Recording Service at 706 Union Avenue in Memphis and recorded blues artists including Howlin' Wolf, Rufus Thomas, Jr., and James Cotton. Mr. Phillips started Sun Records in 1952 and began transitioning from traditional rhythm and blues to a rockabilly sound. Working with a young truck driver named Elvis Aron Presley, Sam Phillips started a musical revolution in Memphis that literally changed the entire cultural landscape in America and throughout the world. Jerry Lee Lewis, Carl Perkins, and Johnny Cash also got their start on the label.

In 1957, Jim Stewart started the Satellite record label in a Memphis garage. That label would find a proper home and become better known Stax records. Some of the hardest hitting soul music from the 1960s, including hits by Otis Redding, Booker T. and the M.G.s (who served as the house band, playing on countless recordings), Sam and Dave, and Wilson Pickett were recorded at the small studio on McLemore Avenue. The 1970s brought the influential sounds of Big Star (featuring Chris Bell and Alex Chilton; Chilton had achieved fame as a teenager in the Memphis band the Box Tops) and the smooth soul recordings of Al Green, who was making some of the most timeless pop music ever produced at the Royal Recording Studio on South Lauderdale Street. Memphis also generated the occasional one hit wonder, such as the Hombres ("Let It Out (Let It All Hang Out)") and Anita Ward ("Ring My Bell"). Another one hit wonder group was the Gentrys, who went to number 4 on the pop charts in 1965 with "Keep on Dancing," a cover of a song originally recorded by an obscure rhythm and

blues band known as the Avantis. One of the young men who provided backup vocals on that song had sold concessions for Guy Coffey at the wrestling matches in Ellis Auditorium in the 1950s - Jimmy Hart.

Jimmy Hart grew up in a musical environment. Sadie Hart, his mother, was a songwriter. Eddy Arnold released her composition “Enclosed, One Broken Heart” in 1950, which went to #6 on the national country chart. Sadie moved to Memphis in the early 1950s, taking a state job and encouraging Jimmy’s singing. Through his mother’s musical connections, Hart met Elvis Presley at the Ellis Auditorium in 1955. (Elvis was also a fan of Memphis wrestling and performed inside a wrestling ring before the matches on one occasion in Ellis Auditorium. He also dated female grappler Penny Banner during the 1950s. According to Jerry Jarrett, Elvis would also come to the Mid-South Coliseum in the 1970s to see the action, getting his private access to the building through Guy Coffee). Hart was also interested in athletics and played on the Treadwell High School football team.

In the early 1960s, Hart was contacted by Larry Raspberry to join his group, known at that time as the Gents. The band thought the name, short for Gentleman, lacked inspiration. After seeing a condom dispensing machine in a gas station that included a brand called the Gentry, the young rockers had a new latex inspired moniker. After winning local talent contests, the band traveled to Miami and New York to perform on Ted Mack’s Original Amateur Hour. MGM records picked up distribution for “Keep on Dancing” and made it a national hit. Producer Lincoln Wayne “Chips” Moman had a challenge in making the record long enough for public consumption. After speeding up the original version recorded by the Avantis, the record was only slightly more than a minute long. Chips simply added a drum roll and doubled the length by repeating the original performance.

The Gentrys toured throughout the country as “Keep on Dancing” rose up the pop charts. They shared bills with the chart toppers of the era, including Buffalo Springfield, the Music Explosion, Sonny and Cher, the Beach Boys, and the Shangri-Las. Dick Clark of *American Bandstand* advised the young band that if entertainers dressed like their audience members, they would soon be sitting in the audience. Hart never forgot that advice, always emphasizing the visual element of his appearance and stressing that with his wrestlers as well. Follow up singles failed to make the Top 40 charts and soon the band was back to playing local gigs in the Memphis area. By 1969, Larry Raspberry had left the band, but Hart literally regrouped and got a

deal with Sun Records. The band had three minor hits in the Top 100 in 1970 and 1971, with a cover of Neil Young's "Cinnamon Girl" having the best success, making it to #52 on the charts. Neil's original followed the Gentry's cover version onto the charts, stalling at #55. By the mid 1970s, the Gentrys were off the road, working regular gigs at a Ramada Inn in Memphis.

Jim Blake was an acid gulping pop culture fanatic that loved comic books, movies, and music. His various business ventures in Memphis included operating an underground newspaper, running a head shop, and working in the music business, both in retail operations and in radio programming. He purchased artwork from a young kid, named Jerry Lawler, in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In 1974, Blake started the Barbarian record label and had Lawler cut a version of Johnny Cash's "Bad News," which had been a Top Ten country hit for "The Man in Black" from Dyess, Arkansas in 1964. In 1977, Lawler was invited to Ardent Studios, which has hosted a broad range of artists including Led Zeppelin, the Allman Brothers, Bob Dylan, ZZ Top, and B.B. King, to record an album. Jimmy Hart was invited to the session. The two bonded as the only participants in the studio that neither drank nor smoked pot. Soon, Jimmy Hart would be invited into Jerry Lawler's inner circle. Yep, the hustling musician was soon playing on Lawler's softball team.

Hart quickly started doing promotional work for the wrestling company. His new employer, Jerry Jarrett, thought Hart had so much energy that his work ethic must have been chemically enhanced. Jarrett thought Hart was on speed. In the summer of 1978, Jerry Jarrett asked Hart to write a song for Jimmy Valiant, who had turned from hated heel to adored babyface in Memphis. Hart delivered with the incessantly catchy "Son of A Gypsy," a perfect fit for Valiant's persona.

In the summer of 1979, Hart moved into a regular slot in the promotion, working as Jerry Lawler's manager. Lawler had just turned heel, so Hart's job was to throw Lawler a chain at the proper moment, one that would lead to a royal victory. However, Lawler never wanted his manager to be a focal point, so Hart got almost no interview time in this role. Typically, he would stand behind Lawler, pump his fist, and chew gum. However, he did channel one bit of human psychology to infuriate the fans. Hart knew that the only thing worse than a sore loser was a gloating victor. After each

Lawler victory, Hart would celebrate in a way that would make a lottery winner appear restrained.

On 1 January, 1980, Hart teamed with Lawler in a main event against Ken Lucas and Steve Regal and on the 7 January, he teamed with Lawler and Valiant against Steve Regal, Rick Morton, and Big Red (Jerry Reese). It was fortuitous for the promotion that Hart was receiving a more high profile spot in the promotion, because soon a big break for Lawler would create Hart's big break in the wrestling business.

Toward the end of January, Lawler was participating in one of the "touch" football games he regularly had with his hometown buddies and ended the day with a badly broken leg. According to Jerry Jarrett, he had warned Lawler that he could be injured given the physical nature of these games, as the competitive spirit of the participants involved often overwhelmed common sense. There was often an undercurrent of tension between the star performer and the promoter; Jarrett was so incensed after the injury he did not communicate with Lawler while he was out of action. Knowing that Lawler would be out of action for an extended period of time, Jarrett developed a plan for Hart to become the lead character of the promotion. While announcing the injury to Lawler, Lance Russell talked about Hart's close friendship with "The King," while Hart made a series of impatient gestures, wearing a white tuxedo and carrying a cane. When he spoke, he gave one of the most famous interviews in Memphis wrestling history, "Are you finally through? Are you through? It's right, Jerry Lawler broke his leg. Big deal, man. Big deal. You know who broke his leg? I'm telling everybody right now. Jerry Calhoun, baby. Jerry Calhoun broke the man's leg. But, listen, I don't want to talk about that anymore. Listen, let me ask you something, man. If you have a prized race horse, a thoroughbred, a champion and he breaks his leg, what do you do to him? WHAT DO YOU DO TO HIM, LANCE? You shoot him, right? Jerry Lawler is no good to me anymore. He can't make me any more money, baby." Lawler, who had not received any previous notification that Hart would be burying him, was legitimately furious about the interview, which had been scripted by Jarrett. Divulging that he had been hurt by the unintimidating Jerry Calhoun, a friend that Lawler got into wrestling who became the lead referee for the promotion, was an added insult.

Hart quickly coronated Paul Ellering as the new "King of Rasslin.'" Most fans remember Ellering primarily as the manager of the Road Warriors, but

he wrestled for several years before moving into the manager slot. While he had a good physique, he did not have the charisma to connect with the fans. Jimmy Valiant was being managed by Hart, but switched to a babyface to start a new program. Another lead heel at this time was inspired by the Iran hostage crises in 1979. Teaming with Ellering was Ali Hassan, the “Iranian Assassin,” who was former policeman Jack Kruger from Danville, Indiana (and, not coincidentally, a personal friend of Jimmy Valiant). Kruger later worked in the WWF as a referee. A main event with Valiant and Dundee taking on Hart, Ellering, and Ali Hassan drew over 8,200 fans on 18 February. On 2 March, Valiant faced Ellering with Hart handcuffed to Bill Dundee and drew over 7,400 fans. While business did not stay at that level with “The King” off of the cards, in the short term, this was a very successful angle. Ellering held the Southern Heavyweight title from April to July, eventually losing the strap to Bill Dundee. Hart would also manage Tommy Rich during his heel run in 1980.

One of the aspects that made Hart such a successful heel was the eternal exasperation he inspired from Lance Russell. While Hart would make pronouncements such as “I’m the great American hero” or “I’m a Christian athlete,” Lance would cringe, roll his eyes, or try to refute Hart’s outrageous claims. Hart seamlessly transitioned into the role, with his cackling, high pitched laughter and his incessant reminder that “he who laughs last, laughs best.” A master manipulator, Hart would whine, cry, wheedle, demand, cajole, or insult to accomplish his goals, yet always shook like a bowl of Jell-O when physically threatened.

Lawler returned at the end of December of 1980 for his professional and personal revenge against Jimmy Hart. His first match back drew over 11,000 fans as “The King” beat the Dream Machine. Lawler, who had left the promotion a hated heel, was now an adored babyface. Having the scheming, unbearably obnoxious Hart as a foe only strengthened Lawler’s position with the fans. After beating Idol in January, Lawler won Hart’s gold record for “Keep on Dancing.” To ensure Hart would never get it back, Lawler tossed it in the Mississippi River. On a personal level, Lawler “accidentally” broke Hart’s jaw in match, as payback for the “you shoot the horse” interview that Hart had done, at Jerry Jarrett’s instruction, one year before. Lawler would later “accidentally” break Paul Heyman’s jaw and was unsuccessfully sued by Sal Corrente, who thought that Lawler tried to

break his jaw as well. Ironically, these types of accidents never occurred when Lawler faced Joe LeDuc or Bruiser Brody.

The basic storyline that the promotion would largely revolve around for the next four years was put in place. Hart would have a rotating group of heels known as “The First Family,” who had the ultimate goal of getting rid of Jerry Lawler. Lawler was constantly chasing Hart in a Wile E. Coyote/Road Runner storyline. In addition to the regular members of the Memphis crew that Hart would represent, the promotion would also bring in stars from other territories to try to take out “The King” under Hart’s watch. On 9 February, 1981, a match against Hulk Hogan (billed as “The Hulk”) drew over 9,000 fans. The match ended with Lawler having Hulk pinned but Hart interfering at the last moment for a disqualification. According to Hart, Hogan was concerned about being double crossed on the finish and told Hart to make sure he got there in time to avoid a clean pin. When Hulk became the biggest star in the business, clips of him selling “The King’s” punches in the match were frequently shown on Memphis wrestling.

A 29 June 1981, Lawler received his “Dream Match,” a no disqualification, no time limit match with four babyface lumberjacks surrounding the ring. Over 10,000 fans came out to see Lawler “break” Hart’s leg. The next month Hart, with a broken leg, would manage to win the Southern Heavyweight title. He then decided to defend the belt on television and was gingerly placed in the ring by the members of the First Family. Hart carefully lied down on the mat and was pinned by First Family wrestler Chic Donovan.

As part of the ongoing soap opera, Jimmy Hart was “tarred and feathered” by Lawler in the studio. Lance Russell initially acted outraged by Lawler’s actions, then as the segment ended remarked, “That was kind of funny.” Some of the other wrestlers Hart managed in 1981 were the Dream Machine, Killer Karl Krupp, the Nightmares (first portrayed by Danny Davis and David Oswald - Oswald was later replaced by Ted Allen, who was then replaced by Ken Wayne as “Speed’), Kevin Sullivan, Wayne Farris, Super Destroyer (Bill Irwin), Stan Lane, Koko Ware (billed as “Sweet Brown Sugar”), Bobby Eaton, and the Cuban Assassin (Angel Acevedo).

In 1982, Hart faced Jackie Fargo as part of a tag team bout. Lawler told Hart to do an interview that hit Fargo hard about his age, which he did. Once they got in the ring, Fargo nearly squeezed the life out of him,

informing him that calling an opponent old was breaking wrestling protocol. Of course, Lawler knew what the outcome would be for Hart, having infuriated Fargo in 1974 when the aspiring king referred to Fargo's age. Hart continued to pursue his musical aspirations with a single titled "We Hate School," which was sold at the matches and received local airplay. A performance video was made of the song, which featured the multi-talented Iranian Assassin beating the drum kit. In December of 1982, Hart and Lawler had a "Final Showdown, Special Cage Match." December was a tough month to draw and the not quite final showdown drew slightly over 5,400 fans. Hart would return in January to team up with Andy Kaufman to cost Lawler an opportunity to win the AWA World Title from Nick Bockwinkel.

In 1983, Hart worked with a new group of talent, including Ken Patera, Jesse Ventura, the Moondogs, Man Mountain Link (Rick Link), the Bruise Brothers (Troy Graham and veteran Bobby "Porkchop" Cash), Duke Myers, the Assassins (Don Bass and Roger Smith), Randy Savage, and Joe LeDuc. In the summer of 1983, Hart was involved in the Andy Kaufman/Lawler feud, falling out with Kaufman in their endless attempts to get rid of Lawler. Lawler agreed to team with Kaufman against one of the Assassins and Hart. Of course, Lawler was double crossed by Kaufman who threw powder in his eyes. Lawler has called the slap fight that Hart and Kaufman had in the studio building up to the event one of his favorite memories of Andy. Outside of the ring, Hart's latest musical effort was "Lance Russell's Nose," a song about an otherwise beautiful woman that had one completely unflattering feature. Terry Funk later covered this tune, and a number of other Jimmy Hart compositions, for an album released in Japan in 1984 titled *Great Texan*. For the Asian market, the title was changed to "Barbara Streisand's Nose." As for the quality of the Funkster version, hearing is disbelieving.

In 1983, the readers of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* voted Hart the "Manager of the Year" and in 1984 he won the "Best on Interviews" category. 1984 brought in different wrestlers to include Ric Rude, Jim Neidhart, the Pretty Young Things (Norvell Austin and Koko Ware), Lord Humongous (Mike Stark), Eddie Gilbert, the Dirty White Boys (Len Denton and Tony Anthony), and Ox Baker. Hart was involved in a manager versus manager feud with James J. Dillon. Dillon had brought Kimala into the territory in 1982. In 1984, he was back with the Zambuie Express –

Kareem Mohammed (Ray Candy) and Elijah Akeem (Roland Daniels, who also worked as Leroy Brown). Lawler teamed with Joe LeDuc and was managed by Hart to take on this new threat. Of course, Hart had to get back on the heel side and the feud ended with Lawler and Dillon besting Savage and Hart.

Later that summer, Jim Neidhart, who was getting a big push in the promotion at the time, became the new manager of all the wrestlers of "The First Family." The new group was "Neidhart's Raiders," a reference to the professional football team that Neidhart was billed as playing for before becoming a wrestler. The "Mouth of the South" began splitting his time between Memphis and *Championship Wrestling from Georgia* at that time, managing the Long Riders (Bill and Scott Irwin) against Ole Anderson and Thunderbolt Patterson. Other clients included the Assassin (Jody Hamilton) and Abdullah the Butcher. Hart was one of the few highlights of the Georgia program, antagonizing Ole Anderson and Tommy Rich in his non-stop aggressive, insulting manner. One viewer that enjoyed Hart's antics on *Championship Wrestling from Georgia* was Vince McMahon, Jr. McMahon reached out to Hart to offer him a position with the *World Wrestling Federation*. Hart, who was being passed along messages from his wife, initially thought that he was receiving prank calls from Austin Idol, who like many other performers, enjoyed doing a devastatingly humorous imitation of Jim Barnett. In February of 1985, Hart left Memphis, ending a financially successful four year feud with Jerry Lawler. Remembering his broken jaw from 1981 and knowing that his departure would not be well received by Lawler and Jarrett, Hart no showed his "loser leave town" match.

Jimmy Hart went on to a long, lucrative career in the *World Wrestling Federation* and *World Championship Wrestling*, which included a close professional association with Hulk Hogan. Some of the wrestlers he was associated with in the WWF were Greg Valentine, the Honky Tonk Man (Wayne Farris), the Hart Foundation with Bret Hart and Jim Neidhart, and the Rougeau Brothers (Jacques and Raymond). Behind the scenes, Hart has booked shows and written entrance music for various wrestlers (including "Sexy Boy" for Shawn Michaels). With his tireless work ethic, Hart became one of the most well liked and respected performers in the business. He has laughed last and best.

Dutch Mantell

“Shut up. I made a mistake when I had you come out but I’m man enough to say I made a mistake and the only difference between me and Lawler, I’m not above, buddy, taking you for a few dollars and that’s what I did. You see this picture, Jimmy? You see this picture right here? (Mantel rips the portrait up and hands half of it to Cornette). That’s your half right there and this is mine,“ Dutch Mantell firing manager Jim Cornette.

Oil Trough, Texas is a town of rugged men. Men that chew tobacco and smoke cigars. Men that carry bullwhips. Men that have no interest in electrolysis. The most famous man of that mythical community, “Dirty” Dutch Mantell, walked out of Oil Trough with Shoo Baby in hand, ready for any fight that came his way. He may have looked like Sasquatch’s hairier brother, but he was a solid performer in the ring and connected with the fans by knowing that both ring work and interviews needed to tell a captivating story. His “Lone Wolf” persona, where he only took actions that were in his own best interest, would later be adapted by “Stone Cold” Steve Austin (Steve Williams) in the 1990s.

After a stint in Vietnam, Wayne Keown started his full time wrestling career in Georgia in 1972. He worked in Paul Jones’ *Georgia Championship Wrestling* group and went to Ann Gunkel’s *All-Star Wrestling Alliance* when she started her promotion in late 1972. Tom Renesto, half of the most famous Assassins duo, was booking for the group at the time, and Dutch would later state that Renesto had served as his mentor in the business. Several decades later, Dutch reminisced to Mike Mooneyham, “Georgia was a great place to learn, but back in those days, almost every regional territory were great places to learn because, unlike today, there was a cadre of veterans leading the way. Today that line of veterans becomes thinner and thinner every year. But I learned about 75 percent of what I needed to know in the state of Georgia ... from Savannah to Athens to Augusta to Macon to Columbus to Atlanta. I always loved Georgia and the fans from that era. For me, it was a truly golden time in my life.”

In February of 1973, wrestling as “Wayne Cowan,” Dutch started an extensive and often bloody feud with Ted Oates. As a performer, Dutch had high praise for Oates, calling him “one of the greatest technicians that ever graced a wrestling ring.” The two men worked a program for over a year, some matches ended in no contest and other grapplers had to separate the

men. The two swapped the Georgia Junior Heavyweight Title, and had gimmick contests such as “Brass Knuckles” matches and “Lights Out Texas Death Cage” matches. In February of 1974, Cowan beat someone billed as “The Champ” for his second run with the Georgia Junior Heavyweight strap (“The Champ” may have been Francisco Flores under a hood; Flores would later open the successful *Universal Wrestling Association* promotion in Mexico). Cowan also worked against a young Lanny Poffo and against Jim Wilson during this run. Wilson would gain fame/infamy for participating in an expose on professional wrestling on the ABC program *20/20*, which is best remembered for David Schultz’s open hand slap on reporter John Stossel. Wilson also released a book, titled *CHOKEHOLD: Pro Wrestling’s Real Mayhem Outside the Ring*, detailing the seedier side of the promotional tactics used by the *National Wrestling Association*.

In August of 1974, Keown had his first run in Tennessee, primarily working on the Nashville side of the territory. He dropped the name Wayne Cowan and, for reasons that may never be explained, was billed as “Chris Gallagher.” Gallagher was paired with veteran Don Kent, formerly of the Fabulous Kangaroos, and the heel duo was managed by Jim Kent. The heels picked up the “Southeastern Tag Team” belts and worked against Ricky Gibson/Steve Kovac, Robert Fuller/Steve Kovac, and Tojo Yamamoto/George Gulas. On 30 September, Gallagher appeared on a Memphis card, facing Tojo Yamamoto.

Keown moved to the Knoxville promotion in late 1974, where he was first billed as “Dutch Mantel.” (Over the years, the second “l” would come and go). However, he wasn’t the first wrestler billed under that name. The original Dutch Mantell was born in Luxembourg in 1881 and moved to the United States at the turn of the 20th century. The original “Dutch” later settled in Amarillo and spent much of his resources on helping underprivileged youth in the community. Wayne Keown had a new name and a new partner in Knoxville, Englishman John Foley. The duo had a featured program with Les Thatcher and Nelson Royal, which long time fans remember as an excellent feud. In an odd matching, the duo also faced Florida mainstays Eddie Graham and Mike Graham while in Knoxville. Mantell and Foley captured the Tennessee Tag Team Titles and also were put over in a battle royal that featured Andre the Giant. As their run ended, they put over Tojo Yamamoto and Jerry Jarrett before moving to Florida.

In April of 1975, Mantell and Foley went to the Florida territory, one of their first matches was against Danny Hodge and Bob Backlund. They never moved much above opening match or a mid card slot during their run. Mantell wrapped up his run in September and moved to the Kansas City territory, teamed with a new partner, Ron Bass (former Arkansas State University football player, Ron Heard). The two had a program with Ted and Jerry Oates, who beat Bass and Mantell in a “Texas Death Match” in Kansas City on Christmas Day of 1975. Like he had previously done with John Foley, Mantell traveled to his next territory with Bass, and picked up a new name. The “Bass Brothers” comprised of Ron and Don Bass had been a sensation in the Gulf Coast territory in 1973, so when Ron returned in 1976, he had a new “brother,” Dutch Bass. The duo took the Gulf Coast Tag Team straps from Eddie Sullivan (Ruben Huizar) and Rip Tyler. Also, Dutch feuded with former partner Foley, as the “Bass Brothers” faced the British Bulldogs (Foley and Ted Heath). Ron Bass and Mantell would later team on a tour of Japan and also had a stateside road trip that influenced the “Dirty” Dutch persona. While driving through Northeast Arkansas, they passed a road sign for a small community in Independence County named “Oil Trough.” Dutch moved the town of 218 citizens to Texas and had a new place for his character to call home.

In May of 1976, Dutch returned to Georgia and was transformed back to “Wayne Cowan,” still teaming with Ron Bass. One of the first tag teams they faced was Ted Oates and Jerry Oates. It was a small world in regional territories; soon the once and future Dutch was facing Ted Oates again in gimmick matches, to include Boxing Matches and “Lights Out” Cage Matches. When not facing Oates, Wayne Cowan received no major push during this run, but faced many future stars including Rick Martel, Skip Young, Ricky Steamboat, Gino Hernandez and Paul Orndorff. In October, Wayne Cowan finished up in Georgia and settled on a name.

Dutch Mantell returned to Memphis in November of 1976. He was quickly put into a tag team program with Danny Little Bear, who Dutch had faced in Kansas City, and Chief Thundercloud. Thundercloud’s real name was Jesus Lopez and the Native American tag team was often accompanied to the ring by one of Lopez’s sons, either Chatto or Chuy. Thundercloud’s son would play drums by ringside, inspiring an Indian war response. Mantell went through a number of partners in his quest to win the Southern Tag Team belts, including Plowboy Frazier, Jerry Lawler, and Tommy Gilbert,

with no success. He then worked a few weeks against Ricky Gibson and had future Kimala manager Jim Dillon team with him to take on Ricky Gibson and Don Anderson. In late December, Mantell was partnered with a young David Schulz. Shultz was much more physically imposing than most of the typical Memphis crew and the two won the tag team straps in early January.

A rematch in Louisville against Little Bear/Thundercloud and Chuy in Louisville was one of the most memorable nights of the run. Lawler was in the corner of Mantell and Schultz. After the match finished, the heels drug Chuy into the ring, who was not old enough at the time to legally obtain a driver's license, and started beating the young teenager senseless. The fans were outraged by the action and the promotion did not waste too many pennies on security. The heels soon had created a riot and had to fight attacking fans to get back to the dressing room. For his part, Chuy stunned Dutch by acting as though nothing happened when they got backstage. (Later that year, Chuy would have his "leg broken" by Lanny Poffo and Gypsy Joe in Chattanooga. Wherever Chuy Lopez is today, he probably has some great stories to tell). Mantell and Shultz would lose the straps to Bill Dundee and Ricky Gibson later that month. The heel team would later feud with Ricky and Robert Gibson, but would often work low on the cards. After the Gulas/Jarrett split occurred, Mantell stayed with Jarrett, teaming with Schultz in a program with Ron and Robert Fuller. By May, the run was over and Mantell was back in Florida.

From May until early 1978, Mantell worked the Florida circuit, putting over talent such as Jerry Brisco, Ivan Koloff, Mike Graham, Don Muraco, and Steve Keirn. For a short time, he was paired with Keith Franks (the grappler's real name was Keith Franke, but he would gain fame as Adrian Adonis), but victories were few and far between. In early 1978, Tom Renesto was booking for George Gulas and brought Mantell into the territory. Dutch Mantell had been working for over five years in different territories, often in large arenas with some of the biggest names in the business headlining. By this time, he clearly understood what worked in wrestling, what did not, and how to connect with an audience. Business was down in the territory - the winter months were always difficult and since Gulas wasn't generous with a paycheck, the card was generally filled with young rookies or veterans that had run out of options. Mantell walked into

the promotion and saw a young “Macho Man” Randy Savage. He couldn’t believe his eyes.
Mantell was brought into the territory to be a heel, but he went to Savage and recommended that they should feud with Dutch as a babyface. Savage agreed and the two men sold the program to Tom Renesto. In early March, Savage started to interfere in Mantell’s matches. On 25 March, 1978, Mantell took the Mid-American Heavyweight Title from Savage in Chattanooga. The feud picked up business throughout the territory. Working with Savage at that time was a real challenge for Mantell. If Dutch wasn’t physically and mentally ready for Savage’s aggressive wrestling style, it was like being hit by a truck when he entered the ring. Dutch topped Savage in an “I Quit” match on the next card in Chattanooga and worked as the top babyface in the promotion for the rest of the year. In May, Mantell dropped the Mid-American strap to Don Garfield (one of the aliases of Don Kalt/Don Fargo), but would win it back after a one week title reign for the aging Fabulous Fargo. In July, Mantell traded the belt with the imposingly named Whipper Watson, Jr. (Phil Watson). Mantell often teamed with Ken Lucas to take on Watson and Ripper Collins (Roy Lee Albern). Ripper was a flamboyant openly gay wrestler that loved to bleed in his matches. Of course, Watson and Collins were known as “The Ripper and the Whipper.” Mantell and Lucas also picked up the Mid-American Tag Team straps. Mantell then transitioned to a headline feud with “The Blue Yankee” portrayed by Curtis Smith. Smith’s closet must have been overflowing with masks, since he had also wrestled as “The Executioner,” “The Spoiler,” “The Blue Demon,” “The Mighty Yankee,” and as an “Inferno.” Mantell and Ken Lucas then worked a program with “The No Pain Train,” Tojo Yamamoto and Gypsy Joe. As the top babyface in the territory, Mantell received a NWA World Title shot in Nashville against Harley Race in September of 1978. In October, Mantell and Savage reignited their program. The promotion did a double title switch on November 11, 1978. Mantell beat the Mexican Angel (Francisco Flores) for the Mid-American Title, but received a badly cut eye in the process. Savage appeared and began insulting Mantell, challenging him to a match for the belt. Savage ending his taunts by spitting on Mantell, who then accepted the bout. Savage kept working on Mantell’s bloody eye, causing promoter Nick Gulas to stop the match and award the title to Savage. It was a smart way to protect the babyface and get the title on the lead heel. Mantell finished his

run by teaming with different partners (The Mexican Angel, Mike Jackson, Bobby Eaton, and Luke Graham) to take on Terry Gordy and Michael Hayes. Promoter Nick Gulas thought the young Freebirds were eating marijuana pills when they recommended adding music to their ring entrance.

After a year in the territory, it was time to move on and for Dutch to get "Dirty." Cowboy Frankie Laine was a veteran journeyman grappler from Canada, who donned Western duds for a tour in Australia in the 1960s and decided to keep the gimmick. Laine and Mantell teamed in Puerto Rico as "Los Vaqueros Locos," which translates to "The Crazy Cowboys." Puerto Rico became a United States territory in 1898, but the cultural climate on the island has not always been warm to the mainlanders. Like Japan, the typical wrestling program featured local heroes defeating foreign heels – that is, American wrestlers. Mantell quickly understood the Puerto Rican people and indefatigably insulted their customs and the people. He was thoroughly detested by some of the most passionate and violent fans that wrestling has ever known. Mantell and Laine dominated the tag team scene in the *World Wrestling Council* that year, defeating Chief Thundercloud and Jose Rivera for the "North American Tag Team Titles" in February. The duo would also take belts from Hurricane Castillo & Carlos Colon during that year, as well as the Invaders (Jose Gonzalez and Roberto Soto). Wrestling frequently in sold out stadiums, Mantell was probably one of the highest paid wrestlers in the business during that run.

The main event was often worked in the middle of the card, so they could get the hated heels out of the arenas before the alcohol consumption of the fans completely obliterated their better judgment. Mantell later recalled to Mike Mooneyham, "Seriously, it was a crazy and highly dangerous endeavor to try to navigate literally hundreds of irate fans just to get from the ring to the dressing room. Imagine the wildest and craziest red neck beer joint and multiply that by a hundred. That's how dangerous it was."

Dutch also began expanding his character during this run, adding the "Dirty" adjective, wearing a southwest poncho (as another layer of protection from fans that were hurling projectiles), and using his bull whip, "Shoo Baby." The bull whip had the advantages of being a weapon in the ring and extra protection from fans. Dutch was able to incorporate these different aspects into his character without getting lost in the character. He could have very easily evolved into a flesh and blood Yosemite Sam.

Dutch returned to the Gulas promotion in September of 1979, often working on the top of the cards against a heel Bobby Eaton. The two swapped the “Mid American Heavyweight Title” in October. Mantell also tagged with and wrestled against Ken Lucas during this run. After making serious money in Puerto Rico, it had to be difficult to go back to the small paychecks of the waning Gulas territory. Mantell put over Eaton in a series of championship matches in December and then moved back to Georgia. Dutch had never received a major push in Georgia and this tour wasn’t any different.

Dutch started low on the cards working against Steve Travis, then put over Ray Candy, Tony Atlas, and Lars Anderson during his first month in the territory. Mantell was also working for Ron Fuller in Knoxville during this timeframe, feuding with Buzz Sawyer. Mantell also worked an angle where he attacked Buzz’s brother, Brett Sawyer. It was during this run that Mantell first faced Troy T. Tyler, better known to Memphis wrestling fans as “The Dream Machine,” Troy Graham. Mantell also had a run with the tag team belts, teaming with “The Matador” (Jerry Stubbs). When Jim Barnett bought Knoxville from Ron Fuller in 1980, Mantell would stay on the scene, teaming with Dennis Condrey to face Kevin Sullivan and Austin Idol. Mantell wrapped up his stay in *Georgia Championship Wrestling* on 15, August of 1980, teaming with Stan Lane to take on Steve Keirn and Terry Taylor. However, Mantell already had a new home. In July he had started working again in Memphis.

Dutch came into the territory paired with Austin Idol, quickly winning the newly established “CWA World Tag Team Titles.” Teaming with Idol automatically gave Mantell credibility and while the two looked and worked differently in the ring, it was an effective contrast of styles. However, Mantell was only in the territory for a short amount of time. He went back to Puerto Rico in September and formed a tag team with Danny Condrey (yet another name for The Honky Tonk Man, Wayne Ferris). Mantell and “Condrey” took the “North American Tag Team Titles” from Carlos Colon and Jose Rivera on 11 October, 1980. Mantell also headlined against Colon in a singles program. Dutch returned to Memphis in February of 1981, stepping into a main event, as a teamed with Austin Idol facing Lawler and Jackie Fargo. Idol and Mantell were managed by Jimmy Hart during this timeframe.

After a few months in the territory, Dutch switched to a babyface. Seeing Mr. Onita, Masa Fuchi, and Tojo Yamamoto destroy Bill Dundee and the Dream Machine was more than the Vietnam veteran could take. After supposedly watching a young fan drop an American flag while the babyfaces were being destroyed, Dutch was morally obligated to assist. Dutch gave an emotional interview explaining his actions and the fans rallied behind him. He then took on Onita and Fuchi with a variety of partners including Austin Idol, Plowboy Frazier, and Koko Ware. During the summer, Mantell was booked in main events with Dundee, Lawler, and the Dream Machine to take on members of Hart's First Family – the Nightmares, Kevin Sullivan, and Wayne Farris. On 13 July, 1981, Mantell faced the Dream Machine in a "Special Added Match" after the main event (which was Lawler/Dundee against Kevin Sullivan/Wayne Farris); the card drew over 8,200 fans. Dutch pulled in more fans the next week, headlining in a "Bull Whip on a Ladder" match against Tojo Yamamoto in an event that drew a crowd just shy of 9,300. (Not sure what would have been more humorous, seeing Tojo try to climb the ladder or use a bull whip). On 27 July, Dutch topped himself again, working the main event with Dundee and Steve Keirn against Onita, Fuchi, and Yamamoto on a hot summer night that drew 9,628 fans. Mantell was one of the key players in a promotion that was doing outstanding business.

Mantell continued his program with Yamamoto. A main event "Stretcher Match" against Tojo in August drew 7,889 fans. In September, Dutch played "Dirty," knocking off Steve Keirn for the "Mid-American Heavyweight Title" in "controversial fashion." Then Mantell faced the Dream Machine for the "Southern Heavyweight Title." Troy Graham had been one of the top draws in the promotion as both a heel and babyface after Lawler returned in late 1980. He was one of the best interviews in the business, often spitting out humorous one liners and insults like a hyperactive hipster late night disc jockey. In building up a rematch with Mantell, after Mantell won the title, he referred to Mantell as being "yellow" and called him a chicken. He challenged Mantell to come out to the interview area and someone appeared in the goofiest chicken costume imaginable, with an elongated head that must have reached eight feet in height. Troy Graham then used this opportunity to, of course, choke the chicken.

Mantell now had two straps - the Southern Heavyweight Title and the Mid-American Title. Mantell would hold onto the Southern title through the end of the year, turning back challenges from the Dream Machine, Stan Lane, and Sweet Brown Sugar (Koko Ware). In January of 1982, he would have a new challenger for the belt, Jerry “The King” Lawler.

The dynamics for the matches between Lawler and Mantell were most interesting. Lawler often referred to the “Southern Heavyweight Title” as “his belt.” Dutch noted that he had looked all over that belt and couldn’t find Lawler’s name on it anywhere. Dutch didn’t turn heel for the program, but showed his independent streak. Lawler took the strap from Mantell on 18 January, but Mantell had a foot under the rope when the third count was being made. Lawler was immediately attacked after the match by the Dream Machine and Sweet Brown Sugar, but Mantell did not come to Lawler’s aid. Mantell later explained that Lawler’s problems with the Jimmy Hart’s “First Family” were exactly that – Lawler’s problems. They were not Dutch’s issues. On 14 February, Dutch regained the “Southern Heavyweight Title” in the Cook Convention Center, scoring a rare clean pin over the promotion’s top star. A somewhat plaintive video of the match was made to the soundtrack of ABBA’s “The Winner Takes It All.” Lawler, who married his second wife later that evening, later described the day as a “double downer,” as he had to both wrestle Dutch and appear at the altar. On March 1, 1982, Lawler regained the strap with over 7,000 fans in attendance. A rematch on 15 March ended in no contest. Mantell regained the belt in a no disqualification match on 22 March. On 27 March, Mantell said he was sick of Lawler, that he hated him, and challenged him on television to a Loser’s Leaves Town match. After slamming each other with chair shots and tearing into each other for seven minutes, Dutch came to the interview table and stated that fighting each other was stupid. Dutch stated that all he and Lawler were doing was making life easier for the First Family. Dutch then offered to team with Lawler to take on Hart’s charges. Of course, after Lawler accepted the offer, Dutch blindsided him, slammed him into the ring post, and then hit him with a pile driver. Mantell’s actions were “the lousiest thing” that Lance Russell had ever witnessed. Lawler regained the title the following Monday night in a barbed wire match with a clean pin. Mantell would then focus on defending the “Mid American Heavyweight Title,” which he lost to the Dream Machine in April. Mantell would win that strap on three more occasions during 1982.

Another humorous segment involving Dutch in 1982 went with the introduction of Jim Cornette as a new manager in the territory. Cornette was a wrestling infatuated teenager that attended the matches every week in Louisville, Kentucky. He used his interest in photography to start shooting pictures of matches at ringside, which were often sold to the national wrestling magazines. He also took pictures of the wrestlers to be sold at the "gimmick table." Jerry Jarrett found Cornette personally so obnoxious, he thought that Jim's naturally irritating manner could translate well as a wrestling manager. Cornette always attended the matches in Louisville with his mother, so Jarrett gave Cornette the "rich mama's boy" gimmick that Gary Hart had used in the 1960s. Cornette introduced himself by stating how classy and wealthy he was, and he wanted to take out scum like Jimmy Hart and his men. He offered to manage the top babyfaces in the promotion, Lawler and Dundee, who turned down the clueless greenhorn. Eventually, Dutch Mantell agreed that Cornette could be his manager in a match against Lawler. During the contest, Mantell had Lawler pinned, but Jerry Calhoun was knocked out. Cornette came into the ring to assist Calhoun, so the ref could count the pinfall. Calhoun, naturally, disqualified Mantell since Cornette had entered the ring. On the next week's television program, a "contract signing" with Dutch and Cornette was scheduled to take place. Dutch started the contract signing by discussing his enthusiasm for the deal, "I haven't been this excited since I divorced my first old lady," and then discussed Cornette's attributes - he wasn't a drinker or fighter or drug abuser. When Dutch asked if Cornette watched cartoons on Saturday morning, a perplexed Cornette meekly responded that he watched "Richard Simmons…when I get a chance." Mantell then proceeded to tear the contract into pieces and rip up a picture of the two men. Cornette whiningly replied, "I put a lot of money into you!" From that point onward, Cornette no longer attempted to be a babyface manager in Memphis. Mantell also worked a program with Dundee later that year, even losing to Dundee in a Mantell specialty – the "Bull Whip on A Pole" match. Another match that diehard fans remember fondly is a bout that Mantell and King Cobra had with the excellent tag team of Bobby Eaton and Sweet Brown Sugar (Koko Ware) from July of 1982. Mantell exhibited his bull whip skills in the match, yanking Bobby Eaton off the top rope with Shoo Baby for the disqualification.

The 1982 program with Lawler established Mantell as a credible main event player in the territory. While he often worked lower on the cards in the future, he could always be bumped up to a higher position when needed. He started 1983 in a mid-card role, working programs with Jesse Barr and Jacque Rougeau. On 28 March, he worked a main event, teaming with the Fabulous Ones and Steve O (Steve Olsonoski) to defeat the Sheepherders, Jesse Barr, and Adrian Street in a match where all the losers had to leave town. He then worked a program with Bill Dundee in two territories. The two headlined in Memphis for the "Southern Heavyweight" strap on 18 April, working in front of almost 5,500 fans. The two would go on to work "Falls Count Anywhere"/"Bull Whip on a Pole"/"Hair versus Belt"/ and "Scaffold Matches." Dundee as a heel, came out on top to advance a program with Lawler. After dropping the incredible "Loser Leaves Town" match to Lawler on 6 June, both Dundee and Mantell went to the short lived *Georgia Wrestling Superstars* program. Dundee was the lead heel and Mantell was the lead babyface. By July, Dutch was back in Memphis and knocking off his fellow "Valquero Loco" partner, Frankie Lane, for the Mid-American strap. (Dutch would eventually hold that belt for a record 13 times in the Gulas and Jarrett promotions). In September of 1983, Dutch and Koko Ware picked up the "Southern Tag Team" belts from The Grapplers (Len Denton and Tony Anthony). On 21 November, Austin Idol and Mantell started another run with the "CWA World Tag Team" belts, which they took from Dennis Condrey and Norvelle Austin. Mantell would later best Condrey in a "Loser Leaves Town" match, as Dennis was about to go to Mid-South and do record business with Bobby Eaton and Jim Cornette in the "Midnight Express."

In early 1984, Mantell and Randy Savage reignited their feud from the Gulas territory in a very entertaining series of matches. Mantell showed that he could really move quickly in these matches, keeping pace with "The Macho Man" was no easy feat. With the exception of an upper card program with a young Ric Rude, Mantell mainly worked as a mid-card performer during 1984. Dutch did swap the "International Title" with Eddie Gilbert in September of that year. Dutch put over Tommy Rich in a main event "Grudge Match" on 8 October, as he left the promotion, after almost a three year consecutive run.

Dutch had often assisted with booking suggestions while in Memphis and Jerry Jarrett recommended Dutch as a booker to Florida promoter Eddie

Graham in the fall of 1984. It was a challenging time. Dusty Rhodes had been the major star in Florida for over a decade and was a top national star as well, often headlining major events in other territories. He had two short runs with the NWA World Heavyweight Title and was a perennial contender for that strap. Seeing the changes on the horizon in the wrestling world, Dusty Rhodes left Florida in the summer of 1984 to work for Jim Crockett promotions in North Carolina. He also took Blackjack Mulligan, Barry Windham, and Mike Rotundo with him. There was a gaping hole in the Florida talent pool and fans began to catch on that the national promotions were “the major leagues.”

Mantell had never been a major star in Florida, but with the booking duties and the lack of babyface talent, he put himself on the top of the cards. Dusty Rhodes made several appearances in Florida in October and November, teaming with Mantell. Jim Neidhart and Krusher Khruschev (Barry Darsaw) were the lead heels in the territory and Mantell faced the pair with a variety of partners including Rhodes, the One Man Gang (George Gray), Mike Graham, and Michael Hayes. Dutch also worked single matches against Dory Funk, Jr., and The Saint (David Sierra). Other talent in the territory at the time included Memphis wrestlers King Cobra (Jimmy Kimble) and Koko Ware, Sweet Brown Sugar (Skip Young), Mark and Jay Youngblood (brothers Mark and Steven Romero), and Brian Blair. Ric Flair came through the territory in January of 1985, and Pez Whatley, Sweet Brown Sugar, and Dutch all received title shots.

With the booking assistance of Michael Hayes, Dutch thought that he was producing compelling television and was seeing improvements in attendance. However, he had no real relationship with Eddie Graham, who was viewed as having one of the best wrestling minds in the business. Eddie seemed preoccupied with other issues and obviously was. On 22 January, 1985, Eddie committed suicide. Dutch stayed in Florida until mid-March, often working in a mid card slot against Bill Irwin while the Freebirds worked the main events. Dutch left Florida for a run in Mid-South. A painful run.

Bill Watts had made huge money in the early 1980s promoting Sylvester Ritter as “The Junkyard Dog.” Louisiana and Mississippi had a large African-American fan base and Watts tried continuously, with no luck, to find an African-American wrestler that would connect with his fans in the same way that JYD did. In 1985, he was pushing Memphis based “wrestler”

Eddie Crawford, who worked as “The Snowman” for the slot. Crawford was, to be kind, not a smooth worker in the ring. It could be argued that “The Snowman” didn’t know how to work at all. Helping Watts in the booking department was Ernie Ladd, who had been a professional football player before going into pro wrestling. At the time he transitioned, pro wrestling was more lucrative than pro football. Ladd was raised in Louisiana in the 1940s and 1950s and the racism he had suffered growing up had a justifiable impact on how he viewed the world. When Dutch Mantell walked into the territory carrying a bull whip, Ernie knew he had the proper heel in the promotion’s racial dynamic.

Mantell drove the endless car rides in the large territory, which covered from Oklahoma to Mississippi, where he faced wrestlers that could barely work and then would end the night being beaten with his own bull whip. It was not a joyous time. In what must have been a major relief, he also worked with the Fantastics toward the end of the run, putting them over with either Bill Dundee or Tom Prichard as his partner.

Dundee and Mantell returned to Memphis at the end of 1985 as a heel duo. Dundee topped Lawler in a “Loser Leaves Town” match at the end of the year, with some pre-match assistance from “Dirty” Dutch. In January, Buddy Landel (William Ansor) returned to the area. As a teenager, Landel had traded a car to Boris Malenko (Lawrence Simon) in exchange for wrestling lessons. Buddy toured through the territorial system as cocky heel and quickly caught the attention of the big leagues for the quality of his work. In 1985, he worked a big money feud in the *National Wrestling Alliance* against Ric Flair and displayed the type of charisma that jumped through the television screen. However, Buddy also had a penchant for the night life and was let go by booker Dusty Rhodes after missing a television taping. Back in Memphis, Landel would make continuously make jabs at Mantell, even though both men were aligned with lead heel Bill Dundee. Mantell finally tired of Landel’s insults and attacked Landel, who was rescued by Dundee. Mantell was now a babyface, but needed a partner. Soon, Lawler would return to team with Mantell in a series of fantastic main events against Landel and Dundee.

Mantell left Memphis later that year for Jim Crockett promotions, working primarily in a babyface tag team with Bobby Jaggers (Robert Jeaudoin) called “The Kansas Jayhawks.” The duo often put over the Midnight Express (Bobby Eaton and Dennis Condrey). Mantell also put over Ivan

Koloff and Bill Dundee in single contests. His next stop was in Alabama, where Mantell feuded with Adrian Street and Wendell Cooley (who had worked in Memphis as “Rick Casey”). Mantell was part of a heel faction that included Robert Fuller and Jimmy Golden. While being barred from the *Continental Championship Wresting* studios, a number of vignettes that are fondly remembered by fans of that era were recorded, titled “On the Road with Dutch Mantell.” Mantell would insult the Continental fan base for their southern heritage, which was nothing like being from Texas, “the real south.” It was during this run that Dutch began donning “Yes, You May Worship Me” t-shirts.

Dutch continued to work tours in Puerto Rico and was working there in the summer of 1988. Before the matches on the evening of 16 July, veteran Jose Gonzalez asked to speak with Bruiser Brody (Frank Goodish) privately. Goodish was a fifteen year veteran of the ring wars and was one of the biggest American stars in Japan, which gave him a level of financial comfort most workers in the States did not have. He was also beloved by the small, but influential, wrestling journalist community. However, Brody also had a reputation among promoters as being difficult to work with. For reasons that will probably never be known, Brody was fatally stabbed that evening. Gonzalez faced trial for involuntary homicide/manslaughter, but was acquitted of all charges. Due to the, shall we say, vagaries of the Puerto Rican justice system, Dutch Mantell received his subpoena to testify after he received news of the verdict. Coupling the death of Brody with the fact that Jose Gonzalez suffered no legal or professional consequences, for several years there was a major stigma against American wrestlers working in Puerto Rico. This happened at a horrible time, since the territorial system was fading fast and there were very few places to work. Mantell returned to Memphis at the end of 1988 and feuded again with Jerry Lawler, but there was no more gas in the tank for that program. Mantell’s primarily influence in Memphis from this point on would be as a mentor, helping to guide Mark Calaway (who worked in Memphis as “The Master of Pain,” but would gain fame as “The Undertaker”) and Steve Williams (“Stone Cold” Steve Austin) from the hand to mouth Memphis territory to the major leagues. In fact, Dutch gave “Stone Cold” the “Steve Austin” name.

Mantell worked for *World Championship Wrestling* as both a wrestler and as an announcer in 1990 and 1991. At the end of his run, he was slotted in a comedy trio known as the Desperados with Black Bart (Rick Harris) and

Deadeye Dick (Randy Colley). Several sketches aired of the trio wandering ghost towns in an attempt to find Stan Hansen. Hansen, who became a legend in Japan by throwing clotheslines that appeared to be intent on decapitation, thought the skits were so inane that he left the company. Dutch continues to have adventures in wrestling. Over the past 20 years, he's worked as a booker in two different Puerto Rico promotions, worked for *Total Non-Stop Action* (TNA) Wrestling, worked in Jim Cornette's *Smoky Mountain Wrestling*, served as a manager in the WWF for Jacob and Eli Blu (Don and Ron Harris) and John Bradshaw (John Layfield), trained rookies, announced pay per view events, worked legend matches, and has written two fine books. When it's time to delivering the professional wrestling goods, "Dirty" Dutch Mantell has never come up a hair short.

The Fabulous Ones

“They come a-running just as fast as they can/’Cause every girl’s crazy ‘bout a sharp dressed man,” ZZ Top.

In 1982, Jerry Jarrett, thinking about ways to increase business, stated "I wish I could clone Jackie Fargo." Dutch Mantell replied, "Well, why don't you?" An idea was born that would create one of the most successful tag teams in Memphis wrestling history. The Fabulous Ones updated the Fargo “brothers” gimmick with two good looking wrestlers and MTV style videos. They brought tons of women to the wrestling matches and Jarrett knew that men would follow quickly behind.

Steve Keirn was the veteran leader of the team. Keirn went to school with Mike Graham in Florida and became gym buddies. He trained under Hiro Matsuda and debuted as a referee – a common way of getting young talent comfortable in front of a crowd and to understand how matches were structured. Even as a young referee, he was being prepared for a babyface slot, with the Florida promotion announcing that Keirn’s father was coming home to Tampa after being a prisoner of war in Vietnam for eight years, which was actually true. Keirn debuted as a wrestler in February of 1973, working low on the cards. He received his first push in a short stay in the Gulf Coast territory in November of 1973, winning the territory’s tag team titles with partner Ricky Gibson.

He would find himself facing many Memphis wrestling legends as he was learning the ropes, grappling with Sputnik Monroe in Florida in 1974 and with Jerry Lawler and Don Greene while in Georgia in 1975. Working in Georgia in 1974, Keirn found himself in different tag team combinations facing Ron and Terry Garvin. He also had a pushed feud with Bob Orton, Jr., which including headlining some of the smaller towns in the territory, working Texas Death matches.

After a quick stop in Ron Fuller’s Knoxville promotion, Keirn entered the Mid-Atlantic territory in March of 1975, billed as the “1974 NWA Rookie of the Year.” Keirn worked low on the cards until a television taping on 17 September, 1975. Teaming with a young Tiger Conway, Jr., the duo beat Gene and Ole Anderson, an absolutely stunning upset victory at the time. Keirn and Conway would chase the World Tag Team titles for a few months, working regular tag team bouts as well as Lumberjack matches and

Texas Tornado matches. However, the young team was unable to wrest the belts away from the tough veterans.

On Christmas night of 1975, Keirn, who was probably just home for the holiday season, teamed with Mike Graham in Orlando, facing Karl Von Steiger (Arnold Pastrick) and Bob Orton, Jr. The Florida promotion must have seen something they liked in the pairing. By February, Keirn had ended his run in the Carolinas and was back full time in Florida. He would work as an upper card babyface for the next several years, often working in tag teams with Mike Graham.

Keirn restarted his Georgia feud with Bob Orton, Jr., facing him in Texas Death matches in Florida or working as a tag team with Graham against Orton and Bob Roop. In May, Keirn started teaming with Bob Backlund and that duo won the Florida Tag Titles from Roop and Orton on 29 June, 1976 in Tampa. Keirn worked a main event singles program against Roop, working Steel Cage and Lumberjack matches and received shots at Terry Funk's NWA World Title in August and in October. Keirn wound up his impressive year by beating The Assassin (Jody Hamilton) for the Florid Southern Heavyweight Title – his first singles belt. His major babyface push in the Sunshine State would continue for the next few years.

In 1977, Keirn faced Ox Baker, Steve Strong (Steven Cepello), Les "Buddy" Wolff, and Dutch Mantell in singles matches, often defending or vying for the Florida version of the Southern Heavyweight title. He lost the title on two occasions, once to Ox Baker and his final run with the strap ended in May, losing to Ivan Koloff. He then teamed with the area's top babyface, Dusty Rhodes, in matches against Billy Graham, who was the WWF Champion at this time, and Ernie Ladd. He teamed with a number of different partners, including Don Muraco, Tony Rocco, Mike Graham, and Jack Brisco to challenge Ivan Koloff and Pat Patterson for the Florida Tag Team Titles. He also had World title matches against both WWF Champion Billy Graham and NWA Champion Harley Race in 1977. In November, he paired with Mike Graham in a Steel Cage Match to take the Florida Tag Team titles from Ivan Koloff and Mr. Saito (Masa Saito).

The end of 1977 and the beginning of 1978 started one of Florida's most memorable tag team feuds as the young babyface due of Graham and Keirn faced former NWA World Champion Jack Brisco and his brother Jerry in an extended program. Longtime Florida wrestling fans remember both the excellent ring work by the participants, but also the subtle heel tactics used

by the Briscos, especially Jerry, as they tried to overcome their young rivals. The two teams swapped the reintroduced Florida United States Tag Team belts, which Keirn and Graham had won from Jimmy and Johnny Valiant in January, on two occasions during this run. During this timeframe, Keirn and Graham worked a shot in Madison Square Garden on 20 March, 1978, defeating Butcher Vachon (Paul Vachon) and The Golden Terror (longtime New York jobber Pete Doherty, working under a hood). Keirn's former partner Bob Backlund worked the main event that night, defending the WWF World Heavyweight Title he won on 20 February, 1978 against former champion Billy Graham. Other tag team combinations Keirn and Graham would face that year included Mr. Sato **(**Akihisa Yone Yoshi Mera/ "The Great Kabuki") and Mr. Saito; Killer Karl Kox and Bobby Duncum; Kox and Ivan Koloff; and Dory Funk, Jr. and Terry Funk.

In October of 1978, Keirn beat Killer Karl Kox for the Florida Brass Knuckles Championship belt, a title that had been used sporadically in the territory since 1960. This feud transitioned into another well remembered Florida angle. After Keirn beat Kox for the title, he was facing the menacing Korean heel Pak Song. Song had his claw hold on Keirn and was refusing to let go, with the implication being that Keirn would either be seriously injured or his head would imminently explode from the pressure. Keirn's military war hero father Richard entered the ring to try to protect his son and was soon under attack from Pak Song. Korean War veteran Killer Karl Kox snapped at seeing a Korean attack a United States service man and attacked Song, turning the veteran heel into one of the top babyfaces in the promotion. By this time, unknown to Keirn, his future fabulous partner was in training to enter the mat game.

During the summer of 1978, Wallace Stanfield "Stan" Lane was working at a hotel in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and received a room service request for four Bloody Marys. On the other side of the hotel door was Ric Flair. From this chance encounter, Lane started training under the tutelage of "The Nature Boy."

Lane debuted in the ring on 29 December, 1978. Lane worked in the Amarillo territory in early 1979, which was not a pleasant experience. Dory Funk, Sr. had bought into the Amarillo promotion in the mid 1950s and by the 1970s, Dory Funk, Jr. and Terry Funk owned the territory. However, Terry quickly saw the handwriting on the wall that regional territories would struggle once WTBS started showing wrestling on cable television;

local fans starting asking Terry about angles involving Tommy Rich in Georgia instead of what was happening on his own circuit. The Funks sold the promotion to Dick Murdoch and Robert Windham (wrestler Blackjack Mulligan). Murdoch and Mulligan, the M&M boys, worked an angle in which Stan “The Man” Lane suffered legitimately painful burns on his stomach. They booked a similar angle a second time and some of the veterans on the circuit thought the wrestlers turned promoters were taking advantage of the rookie and advised him not to do the angle again. Murdoch and Mulligan were livid when Lane wasn’t fired up about being fired up. Lane was soon out of the territory, which Murdoch and Mulligan would only run for approximately one year. Lane then went to Mid-South for several months and worked low on the cards.

While Lane was paying his dues in Amarillo and Mid-South, Keirn worked singles feuds with Pak Song and Don Muraco, faced Harley Race for the NWA World Title, and teamed with Jimmy Garvin to take on King Curtis and Jos LeDuc. On 14 October, 1979, Stan Lane was in Baton Rouge, putting over “The Handsome Half Breed” Gino Hernandez (Charles Eugene Wolfe, Jr.). On 17 October, “The Nature Boy” Stan Lane was in Hollywood, Florida, in a tag team with Bryan St. John. Their opponents were Steve Keirn and Steve Travis.

On 30 October, Lane and St. Bryan, “The Blonde Bombers,” topped Eddie Graham and Ray Stevens for the Florida Tag Team Titles. They swapped the titles with Keirn and Graham in September. In 1980, Lane and St. John continued to get a good push, facing Jerry Brisco and Keirn or Brisco and Jimmy Garvin. Keirn worked singles programs against Leroy Brown and Muraco while holding the “Florida Television” Championship. Keirn also received a few more NWA World Heavyweight Title matches against Harley Race, but at this point, he had been in Florida for over four years. It was time for Florida to get some new faces in their top slots. In June, Stan Lane left the Florida promotion after his first successful push and went to Georgia. Steve Keirn took his sleeper hold and forearm smash to Georgia in July.

Keirn worked in Georgia though April of 1981, coming across as a tough meat and potatoes mat wrestler. He wasn’t flashy either in the ring or on interviews, but still got over with the fans. He teamed with Mr. Wrestling II and traded the Georgia Tag Team Titles with the Assassins (Jody Hamilton and Randy Colley) in July and August. He also won the Georgia

Heavyweight Title from Assassin #2 in August. He lost that strap to Dennis Condrey in September. Keirn feuded extensively with Kevin Sullivan over the Georgia Television Championship, with a babyface Sullivan turning on Keirn during a match to get the title. He also teamed with various partners including Ted DiBiase, Terry Taylor, and Tony Atlas in matches against the Fabulous Freebirds. He had several matches against Bobby Eaton in early 1981. Thirteen years later the two men would briefly form the "Bad Attitude" tag team in *World Championship Wrestling*.

Even more ironically, "The Nature Boy" Stan Lane was partnered with Dennis Condrey when he entered Georgia. In 1987, Lane would replace Condrey in "The Midnight Express," one of the best tag teams in professional wrestling history. The duo beat Steve Regal and Terry Taylor in tag team matches and Lane also bested Regal in singles matches. On 3 September, Lane beat Kevin Sullivan for the Georgia Junior Heavyweight Title. Lane would drop the strap back to Sullivan in January and leave the territory, heading to Ron Fuller's Continental promotion.

Lane debuted as a low level heel in Continental, working against Robert Gibson, Ricky Fields (the son of promoter Lee Fields), and Roy Lee Welch (son of Lester Welch). Lane eventually picked up the United States Junior Heavyweight Title, with Jerry Stubbs being his primary rival. After Lane complained that he was tired of facing Stubbs and needed a worthy opponent, Stubbs debuted his masked "Mr. Olympia" persona, which he used for several years in the territory. While still working in Continental, Lane debuted in Memphis on 1 June, losing the title to Bill Dundee (Lane was also billed as working against "Mr. Olympia" that same night in Birmingham). Dundee would also work a match against Lane in Pensacola on 14 June.

While Lane was working the Alabama/Pensacola circuit, Steve Keirn had returned to Florida. In May, he teamed with Mike Graham to beat the Assassins (Jody Hamilton and Roger Smith) for the North America Tag Titles. He also worked another program with Don Muraco for the Television Championship and he had another shot at Harley Race's NWA World Title. Working on a few cards in Florida with Keirn in May was Jerry Lawler, who faced Dory Funk, Jr. and Don Muraco. Probably not coincidentally, on 8 June, 1981, Keirn debuted in Memphis.

Keirn received a good push out of the gate in Memphis, beating Ron Bass for the Mid-American Heavyweight Championship and often teaming with

Bill Dundee. Opponents included Masa Fuchi and Atsushi Onita, the Nightmares, and fellow Florida refugee Bugsy McGraw in singles matches. Keirn also returned to Florida in August to team with Mike Graham against the Kiwi Sheepherders (Luke Williams and "Lord" Jonathon Boyd). Stan Lane came into Memphis full time in September as a member of Jimmy Hart's First Family and formed a tag team with Koko Ware. Koko was being billed as "Sweet Brown Sugar," a name that was also being used in other territories by Florida/Texas grappler Galton "Skip" Young. In November, Ware and Lane had an extended program with Keirn and Dundee, peaking with a main event on 16 November that drew over 5,800 fans. The feud concluded with a Texas Death Match on 23 November that drew just under 5,400. Future Midnight Express teammates Lane and Eaton faced Dundee and Keirn on 7 December, 1981.

The first version of the Midnight Express formed in the Alabama territory in 1981 with Dennis Condrey, Randy Rose, and Norvell Austin working a three man team, similar to the Freebirds. Dennis Condrey, who was still well remembered in Memphis from his excellent tag team with Phil Hickerson, and Randy Rose came into Memphis in January of 1982, working as the Midnight Express and were programmed against Dundee and Keirn. Stan Lane had turned babyface at the same time and was feuding with various members of the First Family, including the Dream Machine (Troy Graham), the Iranian Assassin, and the Cuban Assassin. In March, Keirn and Lane teamed up to take on Luke Graham and the Dream Machine, in the duo's pre-Fab Memphis debut. A few days later (31 March, 1982), Keirn was in Florida teaming with Mike Graham to beat Terry and Dory Funk, Jr., while Lawler wrestled Kendo Nagasaki **(**Kazuo Sakurada). In Memphis, Keirn continued to tag with Dundee in April and May. Lane worked lower on the cards. At the end of May and in early June, Lane and Keirn tagged together for three weeks, taking on Dennis Condrey and Norvell Austin. Lane also bested his future partner Bobby Eaton in a "karate match" in June. (While in *World Championship Wrestling*, Lane incorporated a wide range of karate style kicks into his offensive repertoire, while Jim Ross endlessly talked about "Sweet" Stan's "educated feet.") In July, Lane teamed with Ron Bass to pick up victories over Condrey and Norvell Austin. Keirn returned to Florida at the end of July and early August, teaming with Graham to best King Kong Tonga (Tonga Fifita) and Kendo Nagasaki. Another set of opponents were the "Alabama Chain

Gang,” comprised of veterans Jerry Brown and Ron McFarlane wearing ridiculously comical black and white striped prison style wrestling gear.
In September of 1982, Jimmy Hart introduced his new tag team, known as “The New York Dolls,” comprised of Troy Graham and Rick McGraw. The two men, no heartthrobs, copied the gimmick of the Fabulous Fargos, wearing top hats, sequined jackets and carrying canes. Fargo then cut a promo saying he was so offended, he would find two new wrestlers to carry on the Fargo tradition. Jarrett had originally planned for Terry Taylor and Stan Lane to fill the slots, but decided that the pairing may have had too much of a “pretty boy” look to appeal to male wrestling fans. (Terry Taylor later worked the gimmick for a short amount of time in Georgia and Chattanooga, teaming with Bobby Fulton as “The Fantastic Ones.” His limited success with the gimmick was nothing to crow about). Steve Keirn, who had more of a rugged appearance and wrestling style, was put into the slot instead of Taylor. On 9 October, a video premiered of the new team, with Stan and Steve being filmed under strobe lights while wearing sequined jackets or in other shots wearing black top hats with fur coats. Stan and Steve posed and strutted while Billy Squier’s “Everybody Wants You” played in the background. While some of the video shots now look silly, a new sensation had been created. Dave Brown would later recall, “The viewership of young women was probably much higher the second and third weeks they appeared. And if you can broaden your appeal to reach not only dad but also all of the kids, it's easy to justify taking them to the Coliseum on Monday nights."
Jerry Jarrett had observed that his children were constantly watching the Music Television (MTV) cable network, which showed nothing but music videos at the time. Jarrett regularly made videos of the Fabs, in various states of undress, to appeal to the female fans. He kept the team in hot matches against a series of brawlers to appeal to the male fans. It can’t be underestimated how important the videos were to the success of the team. Jarrett successfully walked the fine line of promoting Stan and Steve as Chippendale dancer type sex symbols, but keeping them in wild brawls to satisfy the male fans.
One additional avenue for making money at the matches was the “gimmick table,” at which primarily photos of the wrestlers were sold. At times, the Fabs made thousands of dollars per week in selling pictures of themselves to young women throughout the territory. Ironically, Jim Cornette, who was

learning how to be a manager in the Memphis territory, got his start by taking gimmick table and magazine photos of the wrestlers in Louisville, Kentucky. The original plan for the Fabs was for the team to turn heel, have Jim Cornette be their manager, and to feud with Dundee and Lawler. However, due to their extraordinary success as a tag team, those plans were quickly scrapped.

The Fabs feuded with the New York Dolls in October and November. The feud peaked on 15 November as over 8,000 fans saw the Dolls win a main event over the Fabs by disqualification. That was a huge crowd for a November card, bolstered by Lawler facing Jimmy Hart in a handicap match. Rick McGraw dropped out of the program and the feud ended when the Fabs topped the Dream Machine and Bobby Eaton. The Fabs then transitioned into a long feud with the Sheepherders, a team they would face in several combinations in different territories. The Sheepherders were small men, but absolutely brutal blood and guts wrestlers; the feud helped to establish that the Fabs were more than a pairing of pretty boys.

Their next major program was their feud for the ages with the Moondogs. The teams hit each other with everything that wasn't tied down at the Coliseum, with the Moondogs being seemingly oblivious to pain. When Lane and Jackie Fargo faced the Moondogs in May, after Steve Keirn was "injured," attendance for the feud peaked at 7,618. A main event cage match at the end of June drew slightly less than 7,000 fans. By this time, Steve and Stan were such a hot attraction in the territory, Jarrett was able to book two shows for the weekends – one headlined by Lawler and another headlined by the Fabs. The Fabs also worked programs against the Grapplers (Len Denton and Tony Anthony) and the Assassins (Don Bass and Roger Smith) during 1983. In December, the Fabs faced the Road Warriors in Memphis, drawing over 8,000 fans. When Dundee was set to leave the territory at the end of the year, he didn't face Lawler in a "Loser Leaves Town" match, he faced Steve Keirn, who Dundee later described as a "stiff, hard worker." That card drew almost 6,500 fans on December 26, 1983.

The Fabs closed out their program with the Moondogs in January of 1984, topping the bone wielding team in a "Loser Leaves Town" match. In February, the Fabs left the promotion. One theory on why they left was due to being denied time off for family purposes. However, they may have felt it was time to try their act on a bigger stage.

After a short program with the Sheepherders in *Southwest Championship Wrestling*, the Fabs debuted in March in the *American Wrestling Association*. The Memphis promotion was not pleased about losing what may have been the hottest babyface tag team in the history of the territory. Jackie Fargo did an interview about the Fabs leaving, stating they wanted to wrestle in "Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York." The implication was clear – the Fabs thought they were too good for the Memphis fans. In addition to having Tommy Rich and Eddie Gilbert appear as "The New Fabs," Jimmy Hart also transformed the "Bruise Brothers," Troy Graham and Porkchop Cash, into "Jimmy Hart's Fabulous Ones." It was shortsighted booking by the Memphis promotion, neither helping the current talent nor providing a graceful opportunity for the Fabs to return.
The Fabs were not the sensation in the AWA that they were in Memphis. For one thing, when the original Fabulous Fargos worked in top hats and sequined jackets, they were sneering heels. Having Jackie Fargo as their "mentor" in Memphis immediately helped to sell the gimmick in Memphis. In the AWA, having two good looking studs talking about appearances on network shows and hanging out with rock stars was not going to appeal to a working class male audience. The Fabs spent several months in the AWA working somewhat low on the cards, beating makeshift tag teams like Jesse Ventura and Jake Milliman or Steve Regal and Larry Zbyszko. The Road Warriors debuted during the same time period as the Fabs, and while "Hawk" and "Animal" were supposed to be heels, since they did not sell the offensive maneuvers from some of the top stars in the business, they looked like unbeatable monsters. Jerry Blackwell and Ken Patera, billed as "The Sheiks," were heel tag team champions, but the Fabs were not getting title shots when they first entered the territory. AWA veterans Baron Von Raschke and The Crusher picked up the tag team titles in May.
In June the "Original Fabs" returned to Memphis, facing the P.Y.T. Express (Koko Ware and Norvell Austin). The Road Warriors faced Lawler and Austin Idol in the main event, drawing over 10,000 fans. On 21 July, the Fabs faced the Road Warriors in the Rosemont Horizon Center outside of Chicago in a semi-final match with AWA Champion Rick Martel beating Nick Bockwinkel in the main event. Attendance for that evening was 14,000. When Bockwinkel wasn't challenging for the singles title, he was often paired with Mr. Saito, putting over the Fabs. In August, the Road Warriors won the AWA World Tag Team Titles in the Showboat Sports

Pavilion in Las Vegas. The Fabs started a long term program with the Warriors in October, drawing 17,000 to the Civic Center in St. Paul, Minnesota on 21 October. Eventually, the AWA decided to associate one of their veteran wrestlers with the Fabs. The goose-stepping Nazi Baron Von Raschke was in the corner of Stan and Steve, wearing a tuxedo bowtie and matching suspenders (when the Baron was unavailable, the Crusher, Reggie Lisowski, would don the Fab accessories). The Fabs would continue to make intermittent appearances in Memphis during the end of 1984, when they were not booked in the AWA. In November, a return match at the Rosemont Horizon Center against the Road Warriors drew over 18,000 fans (the other hot feud on the card was Bruiser Brody, billed as King Kong Brody since the AWA already had a "Bruiser," facing Jerry Blackwell).
On Christmas night of 1984, Verne Gagne told the Road Warriors they were going to lose the AWA belts to the Fabs. Performing in front of their hometown friends in St. Paul, the spiked and painted powerhouses were not happy. Once the men got into the ring, Hawk ominously informed the Fabs, "We're not going for the finish. Do things our way, nobody gets hurt." Much to the displeasure of Verne Gagne, the match ended in a "no contest" decision. Typically in this situation, the promotion could have simply fired the tag team for refusing to cooperate, but in December of 1984, Verne Gagne needed the Road Warriors much more than the Warriors needed Gagne. As Vince McMahon started his national expansion, he had taken Hulk Hogan, David Shultz, Adrian Adonis, Mad Dog Vachon, and Ken Patera from the AWA. While the promotion was still drawing well in St. Paul and Chicago, crowds had dropped dramatically in San Francisco and Indianapolis. The Road Warriors were one of the hottest box office attractions in the business and they never dropped the titles to the Fabs. The Fabs left the AWA in January of 1985 and strutted back to Memphis. However, the initial spark with the fan base had flamed out. They were a good babyface tag team, but the hysteria would never return.
On 26 January, 1985, Richard Keirn and Wally Lane, the fathers of Steve and Stan, appeared at the WMC studios, stating that the Fabs might be permanently returning to the area. The Fab fathers were attacked by the Interns (Don Bass and Roger Smith), kicking off a new feud in the territory. The Fabs feuded with a new version of the Sheepherders in 1985 (Jonathon Boyd and Mike "Rip" Morgan) and in a few shows promoted jointly with the NWA defeated the Fabulous Freebirds and the Midnight Express. The

Fabs quietly left the territory in January of 1986 and went to *Championship Wrestling from Florida*. Opponents during their Florida run included Purple Haze (Mark Lewin) and Kevin Sullivan; Kendo Nagasaki and the White Ninja (a young Keiji Mutoh, better known to American fans as "The Great Muta"); the Nightmares (Ken Wayne and Danny Davis); and The Shock Troops (Ed "The Bull" Gantner and Kareem Muhammad). The Fabs were the top tag team in the territory, while Lex Luger and Barry Windham were the top singles stars. Keirn received a shot a NWA Champion Ric Flair on 13 August, 1986 in Fort Lauderdale, which ended with both men being counted out of the ring. Like many of the remaining territories, the group was using a small talent pool and feuds went on for months at a time. In the fall of 1986, the Fabs were at it again with the Sheepherders, this time comprised of Luke Williams and Butch Miller.

The Fabs/Sheepherders feud was resumed for several weeks in January and February of 1987 in Memphis. It would be the last appearances of the Fabs for several years. In March of 1987, *World Championship Wrestling* purchased *Championship Wrestling from Florida*. Stan Lane continued to work for the group, but Steve Keirn did not. On March 25, 1987, Dennis Condrey walked out of "The Midnight Express" tag team with no explanation. The team had been one of the hottest heel units in the business since 1984, but now had a void to fill. On 4 April, Stan Lane was introduced as the new member. Until leaving WCW in October of 1990, "Sweet" Stan Lane and "Beautiful" Bobby Eaton would be the best working tag team in the business, however, they were not always properly used by the promotion. Steve Keirn would return to Florida later in the year, once again teaming with Mike Graham. On October 17, 1987, Steve Keirn and Mike Graham won the Florida Tag Team Titles from The Mighty Yankees (Jerry Grey and Bob Cook) in the last night of wrestling for the Florida promotion that had been started in 1961. After the promotion closed, Keirn returned to Memphis and turned heel in a feud with Jerry Lawler.

In 1988, Steve Keirn and Mike Graham were involved in a new promotion in Florida, originally named *Florida Championship Wrestling* and later named the *Professional Wrestling Federation* in 1989. The promotion lasted until 1991. Wrestlers that worked for the company included Dick Slater, Dan Spivey, Dusty Rhodes, Dustin Rhodes, Scott Hall, the Nasty Boys (Brian Yandrisovitz "Knobbs" and Jerry Saganovich "Sags"), Johnny Ace (John Laurinaitis), Robert Fuller, and Bam Bam Bigelow. The group drew

2,500 in Tampa on 11 March, 1989 with a main event of Dusty Rhodes and The Steel Man (Fred Ottman). However, generally attendance was poor for the struggling group.

At the end of 1990, Stan Lane and Jim Cornette had left *World Championship Wrestling* and the Fabulous Ones were reunited in Memphis, finally managed by Cornette as had been planned in 1982. The Fabs came into Memphis as babyfaces, teaming with Lawler, but in January turned on Lawler to collect a bounty and had main events with Lawler/Dundee and with Lawler/ Jeff Jarrett. It was a short stay in the territory as there was little money to be made in Memphis at the time. Cornette later started *Smoky Mountain Wrestling* with Stan Lane and Tom Pritchard working as "The Heavenly Bodies," feuding with the Rock 'n' Roll Express. Keirn went to the *World Wrestling Federation* appearing as the alligator hunting/tobacco spitting Steve "Gator" Keirn. The gimmick was a complete opposite from the well dressed, pretty boy Fabulous Ones act. Keirn also did a stint as "Doink the Clown" during this timeframe.

The Fabulous Ones made their last appearance in Memphis on June 10, 1995 at the "Memphis Memories II" card, a nostalgia event that drew close to 4,000 fans to the Coliseum, which was a very successful night for that time period. The show was built around the "Best of Memphis Tag Team Tournament," and the Fabulous Ones took the honors, beating Tommy Rich and Doug Gilbert in the finals.

The Fabulous Ones were hugely influential in the 1980s, inspiring tag teams such as the Rock 'n' Roll Express, the Fantastics, and the Midnight Rockers (Shawn Michaels and Marty Janetty). While they didn't have the flashy transitional and double team tag moves that would be popularized by later teams, Keirn had great psychology in the ring and Lane came across as the type of cool jock that every woman would want to date and every guy would want to hang out with. In a bizarre postscript, in 2011 a Memphis man named Samuel Ticer passed away and *The Commercial Appeal* newspaper reported in his obituary, with information provided by the deceased man's family, that Ticer was Stan Lane. The man had relayed that falsehood to his wife who believed it until after his dying day. As of this writing, Stan Lane is alive and well. And he still looks better than you do.

The Moondogs

“The Moondogs are howlin’/The Moondogs are prowlin’/The Moondogs are vicious and mean,” 1983 music promo for Moondog Rex (Randy Colley) and Moondog Spot (Larry Booker)

“Everywhere they go, the Moondogs leave a trail of destruction,” Dave Brown.

Chair shots and cow bones. Concession stand brawls and blood. The Moondogs were true wild men, who fought against top stars in arenas throughout the world. How did the Moondog gimmick start? Most likely in the streets of New York in the late 1940s.

Louis Thomas Hardin was a blind musician that performed for decades on the sidewalks of Manhattan. He performed under the name “Moondog,” in tribute of a dog “who used to howl at the moon more than any dog I knew of.” His long, unkempt hair and beard turned white over the years, and he donned Viking gear, including a horned helmet. Famed rock ’n’ roll disc jockey Alan Freed, whose career was ruined in the late 1950s due to the payola scandal, started a rhythm and blues radio show in 1951 called “The Moondog House” and a later Freed program was known as “The Moondog Rock and Roll Matinee.” He used a Hardin composition as the theme music for his show. Hardin took legal action against Freed in 1954, and Freed could no longer refer to himself as “The Moondog” on the air. Hardin plied his trade on the streets of Manhattan until 1974.

In 1972, Utah native Ronald “Lonnie” Mayne, who had previously worked in some territories as “Mad Dog” Mayne, entered the WWWF. Mayne, who had white hair and a white beard, was given the name “Moondog” Mayne, as a howling heel challenging Pedro Morales for the WWWF title. Mayne was, let’s say, an unorthodox grappler and would smash his own head with a chair during interviews or do stunts like eating goldfish or a light bulb. In some territories, he was billed as being from Crabtree, Arkansas and his finishing maneuver was the “Arkansas stomp,” an extremely odd name for an elbow drop off of the second rope. Mayne had an eternal gleam in his eye and most likely multiple adult beverages in the locker room. He passed away in a car accident in 1978.

By late 1973, Mayne had finished his WWWF run and was in San Francisco, feuding with Pat Patterson for the United States Heavyweight title. At the same time, a future Moondog was breaking into the business in

Montgomery, Alabama. Randy Colley grew up watching Fred Ward's promotion in Columbus, Georgia, enjoying the antics of Jimmy "Bad Boy" Hines and the Von Brauners. He started teaming with Jim Baugus, who was working as Jim Dalton, as Jack Dalton. Colley was actually the third "Jack Dalton." The original Jack Dalton was Don Kalt (Don Fargo), who founded the Daltons with Baugus in 1961. Depending on where Kalt was working in the 1960s, at some points he would be Jackie Fargo's brother Don, and at other times he would be part of the Dalton gang. In 1970, Jim Baugus took on a new Jack Dalton, his real life brother Jack Baugus. Then, Colley stepped into the wild west gunslinger role in 1973.

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As Jim and Jack Dalton, the "brothers" worked spot shows in Alabama and Georgia. They did a tour of Puerto Rico, Colley's first eye opening experience to the dangerous island culture. The Daltons made a brief tour in Memphis in March and April of 1975, but decided it wasn't an outlaw homestead. In November of 1975, Jack Dalton appeared for one week on a Gulas card in Nashville and had worked earlier in the year briefly in Knoxville. He spent the next few years paying dues, often doing short tours in the Gulf Coast territory using his real name. 1976 was a busy year for Colley, who hopefully had dependable transportation. He did a tour in the Carolinas, working low on the cards against Larry Sharpe, Boris Molenko, and Angelo Poffo. In June, he moved to Florida, working opening matches with Jim Lancaster (Jim Painter) against the interesting combination of Steve Keirn and Bob Backlund. He also had a match in Florida against Ricky Steamboat, who had started in the business earlier that year. By August, he was in yet another territory, working in Amarillo against Scott Casey, Jerry Kozak, Pez Whatley, Reggie Parks, and Cowboy Bob Ellis, again working in preliminary matches. In November, "Jack Dalton" appeared in Nashville to face Jackie Fargo, which was most likely another short run in the Tennessee territory.

In early 1977, Colley was back in Georgia and Florida, still working low on the cards. Colley received a new temporary identity and a new push during his next stint in Gulf Coast. Rip Taylor (Dean Vaughn) had been working in the Gulf Coast for a decade and was one of the area's top stars, holding many straps in various tag team combinations and many single titles as well. Colley was booked as "The Real Rip Tyler," claiming that the Tyler that the fans had seen over the years was an imposter. Tyler teamed up with

his old partner Jim Dalton (Jimmy Baugus) to win the Gulf Coast Tag Team belts. An eventual feud ending match between Rip Tyler and “The Real Rip Tyler” never occurred; Buddy Roberts of the Hollywood Blondes worked the match instead of Colley. Tyler would later bridge wrestling generations, as he helped in the training of 1990s WWF star Bob Holly (Robert Howard).

Randy Colley then moved to Texas working under his own name, dropping matches to Tommy Seigler, Ox Baker, and Skip Young. While he was in Texas, Big John Studd (John Minton) was also working the territory. Studd had won the WWF Tag Team belts in 1976, teaming with Killer Kowalski as “The Executioners.” Coincidentally, a wrestler named “The Executioner” (Colley) appeared in Kansas City later that year, working opening bouts against a young Jake Roberts. Colley also appeared in St. Louis under his own name during this time.

However, Colley’s days as a preliminary wrestler were coming to an end. The masked Assassins (Jody Hamilton and Tom Renesto) were one of the top heel teams in wrestling in the 1960s and early 1970s, frequently beating babyface teams by “loading their mask” with a foreign object. Roger Smith took the Assassin gimmick to Knoxville, where he had a big run teaming with the veteran Don Carson. Colley came into the territory, teaming with Smith as “The Assassins,” as the top heel team in the territory. By this time, Ron Fuller (Ron Welch) had purchased the Gulf Coast territory and renamed it *Continental Championship Wrestling*. He was running two circuits, one in Knoxville and one in Alabama. The Assassins feuded with Ricky Gibson and Robert Gibson, who was billed as Reuben Gibson at the time. Reuben even brought in Andre the Giant as a partner after the Assassins “injured” Ricky Gibson, his real life brother. (Their real names were Rick and Ruben Cain). The Assassins were managed by both Rip Tyler and Billy Spears (Billy Spearman) during this run. Billy Spears kenw about the dangers of getting too much heel heat; he suffered a legitimate injury when an angry fan hit him in the face with a belt buckle.

In late 1978, Roger Smith went to work in the Oklahoma based Leroy McGuirk territory, teaming with Jody Hamilton as the Assassins. Colley, still working as the Assassin teamed with Don Carson during this time, but Smith soon returned. Colley and Smith debuted as the Assassins in Memphis on 5 February in an opening match against Tommy Gilbert and

Roger Howell. Unsurprisingly, this was the same time that Robert Fuller had taken over as the booker for the Memphis territory. They worked as a mid-card team until April, then worked some semifinal matches against Bill Dundee and Tony Charles. They also traded the Southern Tag Team straps with Dundee and Robert Fuller, completing their run in May.

Colley then went back to Alabama, but with a new Assassin, long time pseudo-German heel Kurt Von Hess (Bill Terry). In what had to be some extremely physical matches, the team was programmed against the Samoans, Afa and Sika. In November, Colley and Von Hess returned to Memphis as the Assassins, beating Steve Regal and Hector Guerrero for the Southern Tag Team belts. They then swapped the belts to their old foes Ricky Gibson and Robert Gibson. In February, the Assassins worked a main event in Memphis, taking on Ken Lucas and Billy Robinson, who they were programmed with for several weeks. The Assassins finished up in March of 1980, after dropping a match to Dundee and Steve Regal. Colley would not work the Memphis territory again as an Assassin. Roger Smith and Don Bass worked the gimmick in Memphis in 1983.

Colley and Von Hess then worked without the hoods for a short run for Nick Gulas, who would soon go out of business. After working under a mask for almost a year, Von Hess actually had hair when he came to Nashville (all self respecting pseudo-German heels were bald). He quickly got his head shaved in a stipulation match. Colley worked under the name Randy Collins. It was during this timeframe that Colley, who had been contacting Vince McMahon, Sr. about a position with the WWF, was given an offer in New York. When McMahon told Colley that he would be starting in six months, the future Moondog, who was used to being picked up and let go with little advance notice in Southern promotions, was concerned that the offer was a rib.

Colley then had a short stay in Knoxville, which by this time was owned by Jim Barnett and was being booked by Louie Tillet. Colley performed as “The Mountaineer,” wearing jeans and a ragged cowboy hat. Some of “The Mountaineer” gimmick would later translate into the Moondog role.

Colley reprised his Assassin role in Georgia, teaming up with one of the original Assassins, Jody Hamilton. During this run, the Assassins were involved in one of the most famous angles in Georgia wrestling history. Ole Anderson had switched to a babyface and was teaming with Dusty Rhodes. The duo faced the Assassins in a cage match, with both teams picking a

special referee – the heel faction picked Ivan Koloff and the babyfaces picked Gene Anderson. During the match, Ole and Gene turned on Dusty, creating a five against one situation. The Assassins fought off wrestlers who were trying to enter the cage and rescue Dusty, while the crowd was in a hysteric frenzy. Afterwards, Ole gave a superb heel interview on how long he had worked to set Dusty up and how disgusting it was being his tag team partner.

As the angle progressed, Dusty lost a loser leaves town match and came back as the masked Uvalde Slim. One night, Colley was in the dressing room when Roger Smith appeared. Colley was stunned to find out that Smith was working with Hamilton as the Assassins that evening and, thinking he had lost his job, was about to leave the arena. Just before he walked out, he was informed that he would be doing another angle that evening and he was dressed in the Uvalde Slim costume. Ole Anderson came to the ring and refused to wrestle Uvalde, since he knew that was Dusty in disguise. Dusty then came to the ring without a mask, much to Ole's chagrin and the crowd's amazement.

In November of that year, Colley arrived in the WWF, not as Moondog Rex, but as Ripper Hawkins. As Ripper, Colley wore the same robe he used in the Assassin role and had no other distinguishing features. During his first television taping, several people mentioned that Colley looked like Moondog Mayne. Colley didn't agree with the sentiment, but was open to a different gimmick for the job.

"Sailor" Ed White was a Canadian grappler from Newfoundland. He had several missing teeth, giving him the appearance (to borrow a line from Bobby Heenan) that he could floss with a rope. He had a large gut and looked like he had just crawled out of a dumpster. His life was not burdened by a serious work ethic and he would not make anyone's short list of the greatest in ring performers of all time. In developing the gimmick, Colley drew back on his Mountaineer look, performing in blue jeans. When discussing the visual element of the team, Colley off-handedly mentioned that he didn't care if he carried a bone to the ring. Vince McMahon, Sr. replied, "Great idea. Bring one to the next taping." (Prior to this, Danish native Ib Solvang "Eric the Red" Hansen had used a large bone as a weapon many years before the Moondogs, but performed in Viking gear). Ed White became Moondog King. Colley transformed to Moondog Hawkins and then

again to Moondog Rex. They were paired up with manager Captain Lou Albano.

The Moondogs were programmed against tag team champions Tony Garea and Rick Martel (Richard Vigneault). Garea had been a tag team champion on several occasions. While not a flashy wrestler, he was a solid performer in the ring. Martel had debuted at the age of sixteen and after eight years in the business, still had a young babyface look and was an outstanding wrestler. The Moondogs chased the belts for several months and won the WWF Tag Team titles in March of 1981. After eight years in the business, Randy Colley was working main events in one of the best paying promotions in the world. However, he would soon have a problem. Due to legal issues, Sailor White was not allowed back into the United States. Moondog Rex was a World Tag Team Champion without a partner. Hulk Hogan (then a heel), Sgt. Slaughter, and Lou Albano tagged with Colley while he waited for a permanent replacement.

Larry Booker was a native of Osceola, Arkansas who was trained by Herb Welch in 1975. He worked spot shows in the area and on the Malden, Missouri cards. In the summer of 1977, Booker was paired with Jerry Lawler's grappling cousin Carl Fergie in a team called the Ragin' Cajuns. The Cajuns were managed by Billy Spears and worked in the Gulf Coast area as mid-card heels. In late 1977 until February of 1978, Booker worked in preliminary matches for Leroy McGuirk in Mississippi and Louisiana. He then spent several months in Kansas City, not getting his hand raised. Carl Fergie was also booked in the same circuits and the two would work as a jobber tag team on occasion. Booker then rotated back to the McGuirk circuit for several months, with no increased success. In late 1978, Booker moved to the Atlanta office, where he worked in preliminary matches for several months. He was showing signs of being a good worker and was also known for his frequent loud outbursts during his matches.

While Booker was jobbing to the stars in Georgia, Wayne Farris was receiving his first push in Memphis. During a memorable encounter with Jerry Lawler, Valiant accused "The King" of doing his "own flesh and blood" wrong by not helping him in the wrestling business. Lawler indignantly replied that Farris needed to make it on his own in the wrestling business and that by bleaching his hair blonde, Valiant had "turned him into a fag, just like you." Farris had his first main event in Memphis, teaming

with Valiant against Dundee and Lawler on November 20, 1978. When he wasn't working with Valiant, Farris stayed in a mid-card spot.

Wayne Farris and the newly rechristened Larry Latham formed the Blonde Bombers in late March of 1978, not in Memphis, but in Florida. The two went to the finals in a one night tournament for the United States Tag Team belts, losing to Killer Khan (Masashi Ozawa) and Pak Song. However, the team quickly went to the opening match slot in their short run in the Sunshine State. In May, Latham returned to Memphis, and the team reunited in June, working against the Gilberts.

The Blonde Bombers (a name previously used by two different teams – Rip Hawk/Swede Hanson and Ray Stevens/Pat Patterson) were pushed into a headline feud when booker Robert Fuller left in June. Working against Dundee and Lawler, as well as Jackie and Rough House Fargo, the Bombers as the lead heel team built business from 4,000 fans to several houses over 7,500 during the summer. Of course, the feud with Lawler and Dundee is best known for the first concession stand brawl in Tupelo, Mississippi. Luckily, Farris ducked when Lawler threw a glass jar of pickles at him, or he might not have a head today.

The Blonde Bombers kept their heat for the rest of the year, working as the lead heel tag team in the promotion. In the fall, they were programmed against Koko Ware and Steve Kyle, then Kyle teaming with Hector Guerrero. (In 1971, Kyle had been paired with a young Jerry Lawler in Montgomery, Alabama. Jerry's "brother" was known as Steve "The Brawler" Lawler at that point in time.)

In December, the Blonde Bombers were working for Nick Gulas, picking up the Mid America Tag Team titles on two occasions, defeating Ken Lucas and George Gulas, and also taking the belts from "The Jet Set," Bobby Eaton and George Gulas. The Bombers returned to Memphis in March, working a lengthy program, including two main events in Memphis, against Rick Gibson and Robert Gibson. When their manager Danny Davis, later of the Nightmares, worked in six man tag team matches, the Gibsons added Ricky Morton to their side, years before the Rock 'n' Roll Express were established. Latham and Farris stayed high on the cards working against Dundee/Morton, Dundee/Jarrett, and had a program with the hottest babyface tag team in Memphis from the early 1970s, Jerry Jarrett and Tojo Yamamoto.

In July, Jarrett started promoting in Chattanooga for a short period of time and the Blonde Bombers worked that end of the circuit, beating Bobby Eaton and the Great Togo (Kazuo Okamura). By September, Farris had left for Puerto Rico and the Blonde Bombers were no more. Latham returned to Memphis for a few dates in October and November of 1980. By December, Latham was working for Bill Watts under his real name, Larry Booker. He worked preliminary matches for several months, often putting over Cocoa Samoa (check out this real name, Ulualoaiga Onosai Tuaolo Emelio; Cocoa worked in Memphis in 1982 as Sabu, the Wildman "from Borneo").

On April 18, 1981, the Mid-South promotion had one of their recurring "Superdome Extravaganza" shows in New Orleans. Andre the Giant and Dusty Rhodes teamed together as part of a tag team tournament. Andre went back to the WWF and recommended Booker for the Moondog slot. In early May, Larry Booker was working the opening matches in Louisiana, doing jobs for Tony Charles and Kelly Kiniski, wondering how long he would have a spot on the roster. A few weeks later, Randy Colley handed him a bone and a WWF Tag Team title belt. He was now Moondog Spot. The Moondogs continued to be programmed with Martel and Garea, although Moondog Rex (Colley) received at least two WWF title shots against Bob Backlund. The duo developed a combination backbreaker/ elbow drop finishing maneuver that looked devastating. The Moondogs dropped the titles back to Garea and Martel in September and then moved on to a most unusual wrestling destination, South Africa. Sailor White found getting to Johannesburg much less complicated than coming to the United States and was Colley's primary partner on this tour. The Moondogs were not just a wrestling sensation in South Africa, but also crossed over to the country's mainstream culture. Johannesburg had seven different newspapers at the time and all of them ran photos and stories on the beastly grapplers. Larry Booker came in for the last month of the tour and accompanied Colley on their next run in Puerto Rico. The Moondogs had immediate fan recognition in Puerto Rico, not from their WWF title run, but from South African television.

Puerto Rico was a dangerous place for American heels. Colley once saw a fan stabbed to death in the audience during a match. When he informed the referee, he was told to continue working. The Moondogs won the North American Tag Team titles on two occasions, the Caribbean Tag Titles, and the World Tag Team Titles. Tommy Gilbert was booking the *World*

Wrestling Council at that time and the Moondogs frequently worked against Tommy and Eddie. Another program was against the Super Gladiator (Omar Mijares) and Invader I (Jose Gonzalez). Gonzalez would later gain infamy in the world of professional wrestling after fatally stabbing Bruiser Brody (Frank Goodish) in 1988. Colley summed up his experience on the island by stating that as an American heel, he woke up everyday knowing that someone would start a fight with him.

In November of 1982, the Moondogs moved to the relative safety of the Georgia rings, being managed by James J. Dillon. On Thanksgiving, the Moondogs won a one night tag team tournament, going over Tommy and Johnny Rich in the finals. The Moondogs were promoted as somewhat as a special attraction during this run and also worked dates for Bill Watts, who had split from Leroy McGuirk at this point, in Oklahoma and Louisiana, and also for Paul Boesch in Houston. While the Moondogs were busy traveling throughout these different territories, Larry Booker kept telling Randy Colley that he wanted to return to Memphis. On March 28, 1983, the Moondogs worked the opening match in Memphis, facing Carl Fergie and Bobby Fulton. It is very likely that Mr. Fergie and Mr. Fulton did not have an enjoyable evening.

The Moondogs did not need an introduction, but Jerry Jarrett filmed a music video of them, howling at the moon, baying by a campfire, and walking through a “swamp” on his property. Colley would later vividly remember one aspect of the swamp - its terrible odor. The song, most likely written by Jimmy Hart who would also manage the team in Memphis during their first run, included vocals by a young man trying to make it in the Nashville recording industry, Richard Lee.

The Moondogs were quickly placed in a program with the Fabulous Ones. Steve Keirn and Stan Lane had become one of the hottest tag teams in the history of the Memphis promotion. The Moondogs kicked off the feud by tearing up the sequined ring jackets of the Fabulous Ones and then beating the heartthrob tag team to a bloody pulp. Tearing up the jackets would seem like a somewhat innocuous angle today, but the Fabs displayed both self righteous anger and deep sadness that the jackets bestowed upon them by Jackie Fargo had been destroyed. Revenge was the only prescription to overcome their pain.

After a wild brawl between the teams in early May, the Moondogs hung Steve Keirn over the top two ring ropes and he was “injured” for the next

week. Jackie Fargo replaced him in one of the wildest matches in Memphis wrestling history and probably Jackie's last great action in the ring. The Moondogs were blasted with chair shots, a trashcan, the ring bell, and plywood as Lance Russell stated in awe, "You cannot believe the mayhem!" The Moondogs took over after Spot (Larry Booker) started using a bone on Lane and Fargo. Right before the duo could "hang" Fargo, Steve Keirn appeared and repeatedly beat Moondog Rex with a 2 by 4, as Jim Ross might say, "like a government mule." That main event drew over 7,500 fans.

The Moondogs were in and out of Memphis for the rest of the year. A June main event cage match against the Fabulous Ones drew a crowd of 6,900. They worked an extended program with Bobby Eaton and Stagger Lee (Koko Ware), who were an outstanding tag team. In October, they worked a main event feud against Lawler and Dundee. They finished up their memorable run in Memphis in December.

After a tour in the Middle East, the Moondogs were slated to go back to the *World Wrestling Federation*. They thought they would be working a program with champions Rocky Johnson and Tony Atlas, but the "Soul Patrol" was shelved by the time the Moondogs arrived. Also, there was a change in ownership since their previous WWF run. Vince McMahon, Jr. was now running the company and the Moondogs did not have the type of bodybuilder look that he liked to push. Moondog Rex came back losing matches to Hulk Hogan and Spot was even beaten by perennial jobber S.D. Jones. They also put over the Samoans. Their run as one of the top tag teams in the country had ended quickly.

In April of 1985, Colley was booked into Bill Watt's *Mid-South Wrestling*, not as a Moondog, but under a hood as "The Nightmare." He would also be referred to as "The Champion" and "The Masked Champion" during this run. Booker stayed in the WWF during this time, where he would defeat television jobbers such as Salvatore Bellomo and Steve Lombardi, but would put over other touring performers.

Colley was the type of big, powerful wrestler that Watts loved to push and he made an immediate splash in the Mid-South territory. Eddie Gilbert and Oliver Humperdink feuded over who would manage the new sensation. The Nightmare picked up the North American Heavyweight title in May, besting Terry Taylor for the strap, and even got a win over Magnum T.A. (Terry Allen), who was being groomed as a possible NWA World Heavyweight

champion. Colley would use the Assassin “loaded mask” gimmick as “The Nightmare,” but lost the hood in a match with Jake Roberts in September. Colley had been pushing behind the scenes for Gilbert to be used more in a wrestling capacity than as a manager and the duo defeated Wendell Cooley and Al Perez for the Mid-South Tag Team titles in November. However, by January, Colley was pushed down the cards and would soon be looking for a return to the *World Wrestling Federation*.

Colley wanted to return to the WWF with a new gimmick and developed the “Demolition” character, which used face paint similar to what had been popularized by the Road Warriors. Vince McMahan, Jr. liked the character, but he wanted it to be used in a tag team situation and he wanted Colley to come back first as part of the Moondogs. The Moondogs were placed in the same slot that they had when Colley left, putting over other tag teams such as Mike Rotundo/Dan Spivey and Jacques/Raymond Rougeau.

In January, the WWF debuted Demolition with Colley as “Smash” and Bill Eadie as “Ax.” Eadie had worked for years as “The Masked Superstar” and was not a known entity without the hood. Colley had just been working television tapings as Moondog Rex. When the duo debuted in the Meadowlands, a group of hardcore fans started chanting “Moondog! Moondog! Moondog!” at Colley. The same fans attended the next television taping at Hershey, Pennsylvania and repeated their chant. The decision was made to move Colley out of the slot and Barry Darsow was became the new “Smash.” Demolition would win the WWF Tag Team titles on three occasions. Colley became an afterthought in the promotion, working one television taping as part of the masked “Shadows” tag team with long time jobber Jose Luis Rivera, who was also a member of the “Conquistadors.”

Larry Booker finished up his WWF run in 1987 and returned to Memphis. Although he had spent several years working low on the cards, that WWF run provided him with long term financial stability. He formed a new Moondogs team that year that worked in Memphis and in Angelo Savoldi’s Boston based *International World Class Championship Wrestling*. Some sources state that his partner during that time was Bill Smithson, while others list it as 1980s WWF jobber Tony Nardo. The role may have transitioned between the two that year, as Larry Booker was working in the Moondogs in Memphis during the same time that Smithson had a very brief run as George Barnes’ tag team partner, Bluey (or Bluie), in a feud against Bill Dundee and Rocky Johnson.

In 1988, Colley returned to his Alabama roots, working as “Detroit Demolition” and picking up the Continental Tag Team titles with Drill Instructor Bob Carter (Bob Blackburn). He also worked a program with Sid Eudy (better known as Sid Eudy or “Sycho” Sid), who was then using the hockey mask wearing Humongous gimmick. Booker appeared in Ron Fuller’s *Pro Wrestling USA* during that year, but received no significant push. Colley would end his career doing tours in Germany and England, where veteran wrestlers were more revered than in the States. He also worked in *World Championship Wrestling* in 1990 and 1991, using the Moondog gimmick, as Dr. X, and as Deadeye Dick in the Desperados. He quietly transitioned out of the wrestling business in the early 1990s. Larry Booker worked independent shows in Georgia and South Carolina in 1990 and 1991, but the old Moondog still had some bite in him.

By 1992, the territorial wrestling system in the United States was almost completely dead. Don Owens sold the Portland based *Pacific Northwest Wrestling* territory to Sandy Barr in July of that year, effectively ending one of the few remaining territories. The 1980s had claimed the territories in Georgia, Alabama, Oklahoma, Florida, and the Carolinas. The *American Wrestling Association* went down for the count in 1990 and *World Class Championship Wrestling* ended on Jerry Jarrett’s watch in 1991. Memphis was truly the only traditional territory that was still alive and the company was on life support. Crowds that had traditionally numbered in the thousands were now in the hundreds. It was painfully obvious to fans that Memphis wrestling was now a minor league product.

The Moondogs returned to Memphis in late 1991 with Booker in the Moondog Spot role. Bill Smithson, who had been trained by Tojo Yamamoto in the 1970s, was Moondog Spike. Richard Lee had worked as a manager in the area briefly in the mid-1980s, working with the jobber tag team of Smithson and Terry Adonis, was placed in the manager slot after some tough negotiation work. He agreed to do it for no pay. They returned to the territory in a television match against Robert Fuller, whose partner was unavailable, so he had to take on both wrestlers by himself. Fuller was on the receiving end of one of the sickest blade jobs ever shown on Memphis television, as the Moondogs repeatedly sliced open his forehead with a blade. Jeff Jarrett came to his rescue and a feud started between the four men.

One element that helped get the Moondogs get over during this feud was the way they would beat the jobbers unmercifully, often bashing them repeatedly with chair shots. At least one Memphis wrestler came into the WMC studio on a Saturday morning, saw he was booked against the Moondogs, and decided that his presence was immediately needed somewhere else. It was basically mayhem in the studio every week, as the Moondogs attacked wrestlers with the announcer's table, bloodied up every opponent in the promotion, and Richard Lee blew his whistle non-stop, adding to the frenzied nature of the scene. The vicious tactics worked. After a few months in the territory, attendance was up from 600 fans in early December to over 2,000 in attendance in early February. The Moondogs may have actually extended the life of the Memphis territory.

Jerry Lawler replaced Robert Fuller in the program and Larry Booker and Lawler, who were both in the original concession stand brawl in 1979, went through the condiments again in Kennett, Missouri. The Moondogs were hit repeatedly with garbage cans, brooms, tables, and anything else that wasn't tied down and they just kept coming back for more. Jarrett received several cuts on his back during the melee. Lawler would later state that every match with the Moondogs was a "hardcore" match. Richard Lee gave a particularly humorous promo, with his face completely wrapped in bandages, after receiving a fireball from "The King."

The feud went on for months. Booker's partners would come and go. Lanny Kean, best known for his time in the *World Wrestling Federation* as Cousin Junior, came in as Moondog Cujo. In July, 2,500 Memphians saw Richard Lee get his head shaved after a Moondog loss. Once the territory started drawing, Lee asked for a pay increase from his base salary of nothing. The promotion refused and Larry Booker paid Lee a nominal amount from his salary to keep him on board. One week after Lee lost his hair, Moondog Fifi (veteran female wrestler Diane Von Hoffman) got her head shaved as well. Cujo left in September and Spike was welcomed back into the litter in October. The Moondogs stayed at the main event level for most of the year, working against the Bushwackers (Luke Williams and Butch Miller), Eddie and Doug Gilbert, and Ron and Don Harris (known as the "Bruise Brothers" in Memphis and later as Jacob and Eli Blu in the WWF). Jarrett and Lawler versus the Moondogs was voted "Feud of the Year" by the readers of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*.

In 1993, Bill White, who had worked in the territory in 1987 as “the Great Goliath,” was put into the Moondog role, as Moondog Splat, for a few months. The combination of low pay and tremendous punishment made it difficult to keep the second Moondog slot filled. Booker teamed with his long time foe Jarrett during the summer of 1993. Spike and Cujo came back to be the Moondog team in August, the first time Booker wasn’t used in that tag team role. By this time, Jarrett and Lawler were well established in the *World Wrestling Federation* and WWF talent would frequently work with Lawler in the main event slots.

Bill White would return to team with Booker in 1994, confusingly being referred to at this time as “Moondog Rex.” It was somewhat insulting to use the “Rex” name considering the physical comparison of the portly White to the powerhouse that Randy Colley was. They were put into a main event role, working with Lawler and Brian Christopher. They were then transitioned into a mid-card program with Billy Travis and Don Bass. In a singles match, Booker received a shot at the USWA title in July, losing to the Dream Machine (Troy Graham). Later that year, the tag team would work with Tommy Rich and Buddy Landel. Spot and Rex stayed in the area until the summer of 1995. Memphis, which always seemed to need a Moondog on the card at this point, brought back Moondog Cujo (Larry Kean) later that year.

Booker would continue to work in the area for many years, also opening up a wrestling school in his hometown of Osceola. One internet fan remembers the Moondog working in front of a church group comprised of fifteen fans, yet still putting on an entertaining show. People that worked with Larry Booker always talked highly of his kindness and professionalism, which was a far howl away from his barbaric ring persona.

In March of 2003, Moondog Spot appeared in TNA, barking in the ring to the delight of the crowd. A few weeks later he teamed with Hacksaw Jim Duggan to defeat Mike Sanders and Glen Gilbertti. He was booked on “Jerry Lawler’s Birthday Bash” in Memphis on 29 November of 2003, working against the Rock ‘n’ Roll Express with yet another Moondog partner, Moondog Puppy Love. Larry Booker, who did not disclose to his fellow workers that he was suffering from diabetes, passed away in the ring that night. Randy Colley later reflected to Marshall Ward, "And in all of the towns too, for him to die -- Memphis, Tennessee -- that was his favorite

place to be. He'd rather be in Memphis, Tennessee than in Madison Square Garden any day."
For Memphis wrestling fans, the Moondogs will certainly never be forgotten. No bones about it.

Eddie Gilbert

"Jerry Lawler, you are my ultimate goal in my life. Not just in wrestling, in life. Eddie Gilbert is the man to take your place," Eddie Gilbert promo from 1994.

In the film *Harry Potter and the Philosopher Stone*, the title character becomes obsessed with The Mirror of Erised. The mirror, according to Albus Dumbledore, shows us, "the deepest and most desperate desires of our hearts." Dumbledore warns that men "have wasted away in front of it, even gone mad…it does not do well to dwell on dreams…and forget to live." Thomas Edward Gilbert, Jr. both idolized Jerry Lawler and became obsessed with replacing him as "The King" of Memphis wrestling. It was a dream unrealized.

Eddie Gilbert grew up in professional wrestling. His grandfather, Arley Gilbert, had wrestled on the carnival circuit. Tommy Gilbert, his father, was an established star in Tennessee, pushed both in singles matches and as part of a tag team with Eddie Marlin. Eddie Gilbert's life revolved around the business - working as a photographer, writing articles for wrestling programs, studying the business, and dreaming of being a star performer and booker. While he undoubtedly loved and admired his father, it was the cockiness and charisma of Jerry Lawler that fully captured his imagination. He was trained by his father and debuted as a professional before graduating high school.

From 1963 to 1987, Henry Rogers promoted weekly cards in Malden, Missouri. The shows served as a training ground for young wrestlers; Herb Welch often sent his trainees to Rogers for valuable experience. Wayne Farris, Koko Ware, Larry Booker, and David Schultz all worked in Malden early in their careers. Due to a working arrangement with Angelo Poffo in the early 1980s, Randy Savage also made an appearance in the small Southeastern Missouri community. Sid Eudy (Sid Vicious) worked there many years later. Gilbert debuted there under the name Tommy Gilbert, Jr. in February of 1979. A young wrestler earned their pay in Malden, often starting the night in a singles match, coming out in the next bout under a mask, working a tag team match in the third event, and then ending the evening in a battle royal.

In May of 1979, Tommy Gilbert, Jr. debuted in Memphis (there are conflicting reports on whether he missed his high school graduation

ceremony due to a wrestling commitment). Very shortly after his debut, booker Robert Fuller left Memphis, taking a significant amount of the talent with him back to the Knoxville territory. Due to this vacuum, Eddie (his name changed in the billing in June of 1979) was moved into his first significant feud, teaming with his father Tommy to take on the father/son tag team comprised of Buddy and Ken Wayne. It was during this feud that Buddy Wayne used the fake apology angle, pretending to apologize to Tommy Gilbert for his overzealous parental involvement in a match, then attacking Tommy after he accepted the apology. Eddie would use the fake apology angle in later feuds with Tommy Rich and with Bill Watts. During his first run in Memphis, Eddie teamed up with his dad to take on the Freebirds (Michael Hayes and Terry Gordy) and the Blonde Bombers (Larry Latham and Wayne Ferris).

The Gilberts left Memphis for the *Central States* promotion based in Kansas City. Bob Geigel was known as a well liked promoter, but Kansas City was not a big money territory. Often, young wrestlers would work the area - both Roddy Piper and Jesse Ventura were sent to Kansas City for their first runs in the business. Eddie was treated well in Kansas City, feuding with Rock Hunter and Ron McFarlane, winning a number of those contests. Another frequent foe was Bill Howard (real name Howard Newell) who worked in both Memphis and for Poffo's ICW using the Ratamyus gimmick. With less than one year in the business, Gilbert teamed with Andre the Giant in Kansas City and also partnered with his dad to challenge Jack and Jerry Brisco. He also worked a number of mixed tag team events, pairing up with a teenage Wendi Richter to take on Ron McFarlane and the Fabulous Moolah (Mary Ellison). Eddie also worked a few dates for Sam Muchnick in St. Louis during this run.

1980 was a busy year for Eddie. In addition to working in the *Central States* territory, he also teamed with his father in Leroy McGuirk's Oklahoma based *Tri-State Wrestling Association*. The father/son pair picked up that company's version of the U.S. tag team titles. Meanwhile, Eddie continued to work in Kansas City, teaming with established stars including Dick Murdoch, Pat O'Connor, and area mainstay Kerry Brown. Eddie often found himself in the losing end of tag team battles against Pak Song and Takachiho (the Great Kabuki). Another regular opponent during this timeframe was Ed Wiskowski, who would gain fame in the AWA with an African white supremacist gimmick using the name Colonel DeBeers.

Eddie then spent a few months in Georgia, generally working low on the cards. By July of 1980, the nineteen year old man was back in Memphis. He was still slight in stature, lacking in charisma, very much still “Tommy Gilbert’s son.”

Eddie returned working in a mid card role, teaming alternately with Carl Fergie and Tojo Yamamoto against the Manchurians (Samoans Tio and Tapu Taylor). He teamed with his father to take the Southern Tag Team titles on two occasions, downing Killer Karl Krupp (the monocle wearing, riding crop waving pseudo-German George Momberg) and El Mongol (identify unknown; it was not long time Georgia wrestler Raul Molina who also performed under that name). Tommy and Eddie also defeated Sonny King and The Angel (Frank Morrell) for the straps. Tommy continued to work regular shows in Kansas City, gaining victories over Jesse Barr and the Super Destroyer (who was working in Memphis at the same time without the mask as Bill Irwin). In February of 1981, Eddie transitioned from teaming with his father to teaming with other partners including Ricky Morton, Eddie Hogan (Ed Leslie, also known as Brutus Beefcake), and Big Red (Jerry Reese).

In May of 1981, Eddie returned to Leroy McGuirk’s Tri-State promotion, teaming with Ricky Morton to pick up the tag team belts from Jerry Brown (Gerald Brown) and Ron McFarlane. McGuirk had been promoting in Oklahoma since 1958, but had fallen on hard times after his primary booker/star Bill Watts split to start his own company in 1979. Gilbert and Morton were promoted as the main babyface tag team, but in August, Gilbert and Morton, along with Ed Wiskowski, Mike George, Steve Lawler, Jerry Brown, and Ron McFarlane no showed an event in Oklahoma City over a pay dispute. Ten days later, Gilbert and Morton were in Memphis, winning the Southern Tag Team titles over Masa Fuchi and Mr. Onita. One year later, Leroy McGuirk would be out of business.

The feud with Masa Fuchi, Atsushi Onita, and Tojo is primarily remembered for the wild concession stand brawl in Tupelo. In addition to using tables, chairs, boards, garbage cans, sticks, and pots, condiments were not spared in the mayhem. One will rarely see a video with more mustard and blood. On September 14, 1981, the teams were in a main event grudge match in Memphis. Without Lawler on the card, the feud drew over 7,000 fans that night. Gilbert and Morton teamed together through November. In December, Eddie was paired up with his father again, taking on the original

Midnight Express, various combinations between Dennis Condrey, Randy Rose, and Norvell Austin.

Eddie hit the road again in 1982, picking up the North American Tag Team titles with Ricky Romero in January, beating old acquaintances Jerry Brown and Ron McFarlane. In 1982, Tommy Gilbert was working as the booker in Puerto Rico and the father/son duo teamed up again to feud with the Moondogs (Randy Colley and Larry Latham). Randy Colley would later state that the Gilberts were one of the best tag teams that the Moondogs ever faced.

In October of 1982, Eddie went to work for Vince McMahon, Jr.'s *World Wrestling Federation*. Vince had purchased the company from his father that year and had much different views on the future of wrestling than the established promoters. While Vince McMahon, Sr.'s company was separate from the *National Wrestling Alliance* (NWA) and the *American Wrestling Association* (AWA), he had always respected the traditional promotional boundaries that had been established. While he could have cherry picked wrestlers due to the big payoff money available in the New York market, he chose to work cooperatively with promoters, rotating talent as needed for his established stars. In 1982, the world did not know it yet, but Vince McMahon, Jr. was going to destroy that business model.

Eddie arrived as an undersized babyface, teaming with a young Curt Henning and beating lower level performers such as Bob Bradley (Robert Markovich), Jose Estrada, and Johnny Rodz (Johnny Rodriguez). He did jobs for the original Tiger Mask (Japanese sensation Satoru Sayama) and teamed with Tony Garea in putting over the Samoans, Afa and Sika. He also teamed with WWF Champion Bob Backlund, in a mentor/protégé angle.

After a television taping on May 10, 1983, Eddie was involved in a serious automobile accident that resulted in a broken neck. Although Eddie returned to the ring less than three months after the injury, he would continue to suffer from chronic neck pain. Considering that he often took big bumps in the ring, it would not be impractical to speculate that painkillers became part of Eddie's regimen. Additionally, New York was known as a big man's territory. Dr. George Zahorian regularly attended the television tapings in Allentown and Hamburg, Pennsylvania. In addition to serving on the state athletic commission, Zahorian also regularly provided wrestlers with another commodity – steroids. As a small man wanting to

become a star in a big man's world, Eddie may have used steroids as well, to increase his muscle mass.

In August of 1983, the WWF brought Eddie back for a major injury angle. His return was hyped on interview segments with Buddy Rogers and Roddy Piper. In a match against The Masked Superstar (Bill Eadie), Eddie was beaten with a swinging neckbreaker. After the match, Gilbert received another neckbreaker on the concrete floor by the ring. Eddie sold the move as though he was dead, giving Bob Backland more indignant fuel for his rematches with the Masked Superstar. Eddie stayed in the WWF through March of 1984, working low on the cards while Bob Backland was losing the belt to the Iron Sheik, who then dropped it to Hulk Hogan. On his way out the door, he teamed with Tony Garea and did a job for a new tag team, Roddy Piper and David Shultz. Vince was putting his plans in place to dominate the wrestling business, taking the top drawing talent away from his competitors.

After leaving the WWF, Gilbert returned to Memphis for a major babyface push. He was teamed with Tommy Rich and billed as "The New Fabulous Ones." Eddie bleached his hair for the role and grew a beard to cover plastic surgery scars that were remnants from the neck injury. While the push for the New Fabs didn't work, Eddie was transformed in the fan's eyes from an undersized babyface role to a fiery southern brawler. The duo was programmed against Porkchop Cash (Bobby Cash) and the Dream Machine (Troy Graham) who were billed as Jimmy Hart's Fabulous Ones. By the summer, the team was no longer referred to as The Fabs, but simply as Eddie Gilbert and Tommy Rich. In July, Tommy won the International singles belt, which would lead to a major angle in August.

The Wrestling Fans International Association (WFIA) was a group that would regularly vote on awards such as "Wrestler of the Year," and have an annual banquet. In 1984, the group named Tommy Rich and Eddie Gilbert as the Tag Team of the Year and came to Memphis to present the award. During the presentation, Dave Brown and Lance Russell emphasized it was an unusual circumstance, because Gilbert and Rich were no longer a team. Eddie, who had already started his heel turn, accepted his award first and noted that Tommy was too much of a "big shot" to show up at studio wrestling, now that he was the International Champion. Tommy came out and attacked Eddie and Gilbert did a major blade job. Gilbert, covered with blood, then apologized for letting down the fans, admitting that he was

jealous of Rich and said that “Tommy is like a brother to me.” Admitting he had been wrong, Lance Russell remarked, “It takes a bigger man to do that…”. Tommy came out and accepted the apology and while they were walking off camera, Eddie ran him into the ring post. Rich did a major blade job, while Lance fumed, “You deserve anything you get from now on, I guarantee you that!” After more than five years in the business, Eddie had conducted his first money interview. He was no longer thought of as “Tommy Gilbert’s son.”

Gilbert feuded with Rich in August and September, winning the International title in the process. While Gilbert was getting a major push in Memphis, it was temporarily derailed in September. In order to compete with the rapid expansion of the *World Wrestling Federation*, a group of remaining promoters, including Vern Gagne, Jim Crockett, Bill Watts, and Ole Anderson, decided to share talent under the banner *Pro Wrestling USA*. At a television taping in Memphis, all of the talent that was pushed on a weekly basis, except for Lawler and Tommy Rich, lined up to do jobs for Terry Funk, Nick Bockwinkel, the Road Warriors, and Harley Race, among others. Gilbert did quick jobs that evening for both Lawler and Rick Martel. It was odd that Jerry Jarrett was willing to have his crew look like second rate talent on a national scale. Due to the egos and agendas of the various promoters, the collaborative effort never gained traction.

Eddie worked a program with Lanny Poffo in October, then transitioned into a tag team feud with Tommy Gilbert against Lanny and Randy Savage. By the end of December, Eddie moved into the top heel slot in the promotion, having his first major feud against his childhood idol, Jerry Lawler. During this feud, Gilbert did the entertaining “This Is Your Life” skit. *This Is Your Life* was a long running television series, debuting in 1952, that involved a guest who would be surprised throughout the program with different friends and family members from their past. Gilbert, as the self-righteous heel, used the segment to argue that Lawler used people to get what he wanted. He calmly discussed Lawler’s relationships with Sam Bass and Andy Kaufman, then blamed Lawler for their deaths. Jim White did a taped segment (which may have been voiced by Jerry Jarrett) as a drunk who had been cast aside by Lawler. Plowboy Frazier, billed as Playboy Frazier, drawled in his deep southern accent that he had never been to Philadelphia, Mississippi, in fact he was from “Philadelphia, Pennsylvania!” Lawler surmised that Gilbert’s goal was to remove him

from the top slot in the promotion, like Lawler did to Jackie Fargo in the 1970s.

Gilbert took the Southern Heavyweight title from Lawler in February. However, he quickly dropped the title back to Lawler in the bout where Jimmy Hart, who no showed the event, had to leave town. Following Hart's departure, Gilbert recreated the Lawler's Army gimmick and put together Gilbert's Army. Unfortunately, his troops weren't very impressive – Jerry Bryant, Plowboy Frazier, and longtime WWF jobber "Iron" Mike Sharpe, who was receiving a big push in Memphis at the time. Local wrestler Kenny Shane briefly reprised his Jimmy Hart, Jr. role for the occasion. During this run, Eddie established himself as being both a top notch worker in the ring and also an excellent heel interview. After the Lawler feud ended, Gilbert worked a program with Dutch Mantell. Ironically, before leaving Memphis, Gilbert teamed up with Lanny Poffo for a few matches against Steve Keirn and Stan Lane, also known as The Fabulous Ones.

In May of 1985, Gilbert was booked into *Mid-South Wrestling*. While Bill Watts was coming off of his most successful year in 1984, with the infusion of Memphis talent and booking by Bill Dundee, he still preferred to push big men like Steve Williams, Jim Duggan, and Terry Gordy. Gilbert began as a lower level heel, managed by Sir Oliver Humperdink. He then transitioned into a player/coach role, both managing and wrestling. With his bleach blonde hair, white gloves, purple tights, tuxedo cut "Hot Stuff" jacket, and the most garish sunglasses he could find, Eddie created quite a visual spectacle. He began billing himself as being from "Every Girl's Dream/Every Woman's Fantasy." Teaming with the Nightmare, former Moondog Randy Colley, he won the Mid-South tag team titles in November of 1985.

In March of 1986, Bill Watts made the decision to try to turn Mid-South into a national company. He began promoting shows outside of the traditional Mid-South territory and renamed the company the *Universal Wrestling Federation*. Shortly thereafter, Gilbert was involved a major angle with Watts. As "Hot Stuff" Eddie Gilbert, he was serving as manager of a young tag team called the Blade Runners, comprised of Sting (Steve Borden) and Rock (Jim Hellwig, who would later be known as the Ultimate Warrior). In addition, he managed the "Russian" Korsitia Korchenko (Dave Strawn). Ivan and Nikita Koloff were also booked into the territory for a few shows.

Watts began doing interviews which stressed how unpatriotic it was for anyone to associate with the Russians, who ultimately wanted to end the American way of life. As Jim Cornette once said, Watts specialized in interviews "where the baseball bat is made of apple pie." Gilbert then came to the ring to make an apology to Watts. He told the Cowboy that Watts was a great man, that he was right about the Russians, and offered him a Soviet flag that Watts could burn in the ring if he so desired. The Blade Runners came into the aisle while the two were talking in the ring. When asked while they were there, Eddie off-handedly mentioned that he would still be managing that team. Of course, right after Watts accepted the flag, he was attacked by the Koloffs and Korchenko. Gilbert participated in the assault and Watts was bloodied with a red (as in Commie) shovel. Jim Ross sold the angle as though America had just lost the Cold War.

Watts then started his revenge tour. He legitimately stretched and intimidated Korchenko (Dave Strawn) to the point that the wrestler walked out of the ring, headed straight for his car, and never wrestled again. Watts was then booked in a match against Sting with the stipulation that he would get five minutes with Gilbert if he won the match. After pinning Sting with an Oklahoma Stampede (a running powerslam), Watts began to bloody Gilbert to the delight of the fans. However, before he could finish the job, the Freebirds (Terry Gordy, Michael Hayes, and Buddy Roberts) came to the ring and attacked Watts. Gilbert kept his heat and Watts was moved to a new storyline.

As Watts worked to expand the territory, he picked up a number of wrestlers from *World Class Championship Wrestling* including the Freebirds, Chris Adams, King Parsons, and booker Ken Mantell. Bringing in John Tatum (John Frankel), Jack Victory (Ken Rinehurst), and Tatum's girlfriend Missy Hyatt would have a major impact on Eddie's life.

Melissa Hiatt was a wrestling fan that, by her own admission, used her sexuality to get into the business. She became romantically linked with Tatum and was booked into the Dallas office, which was a leader in using "valets" as part of the wrestling program under booker Ken Mantell. Eddie was married when he met Missy, who at the time was a stunningly beautiful woman. The two began a business relationship inside the ring as "Hot Stuff and Hyatt International," which included angles where Eddie would beam at Missy like a smitten schoolboy. Outside of the ring, the two started a relationship and would soon be married. Tatum teamed with Gilbert and

then feuded with Gilbert after Hyatt left him. Life was imitating art. After Jim Hellwig left the UWF for World Class Championship Wrestling, where he would be known as the Dingo Warrior, Gilbert began to team with Sting, working a program with the Fantastics. Bobby Fulton and Tommy Rogers may have been undersized for main events, but they were one of the best working tag teams in the business in the 1980s. The four men had excellent matches as Sting began to improve as a performer under Gilbert's guidance. While working for Watts, Gilbert and Hyatt received offers to work for Vince McMahon. Missy was going to receive a Piper's Pit style talk show segment called "Missy's Manor." Eddie was given the option of working as either as a wrestler or as a manager. While Missy took the position, Watts offered Gilbert the job as booker for the company. For Gilbert, the chance to become a booker was literally a dream come true. He stayed with the UWF, while Missy went to work for Vince McMahon. Unfortunately for her, the taped segments were not successful and were never aired. She would soon be back in the UWF, which in actuality, no longer really existed.

Bill Watts had failed in his attempt to expand the UWF. Due to a poor economy in his traditional markets, an inability to profitably move into new areas, and losing top name talent to the *World Wrestling Federation*, the Cowboy knew he was holding a losing hand. He sold the company to Jim Crockett Promotions in April of 1987. While *World Championship Wrestling* would continue to promote shows under the UWF banner, Big Bubba Rogers (Ray Traylor) was quickly sent in to win the UWF title. Instead of booking a heated invasion angle, the UWF wrestlers were portrayed as being less competitive than their WCW counterparts. Gilbert formed a team with Dick Murdoch and worked a program with "Dr. Death" Steve Williams and Terry Gordy. Drawing from his Memphis days, Gilbert was involved in "The Battle of New Orleans," which involved a wild concession style type brawl as Gilbert and Terry Taylor took on Sting and Chris Adams. As the transition from a separately billed entity ended, most of the UWF wrestlers moved into other territories. While UWF alumni Sting and Rick Steiner would become major stars for WCW, the misuse of UWF talent and poor booking decisions did not help Jim Crockett's long term viability in wrestling. Less than 18 months after purchasing the UWF, Crockett sold *World Championship Wrestling* to Ted Turner.

In February of 1988, Gilbert returned to Memphis, making the most of his "Hot Stuff" moniker. Picking up a trick that both Jerry Lawler and the Sheik (Ed Farhat) frequently used, Eddie returned to the promotion tossing fireballs, in separate incidents, at Lawler, Jerry Jarrett, and Randy Hales. Doug Gilbert, Tommy Gilbert, and Missy Hyatt were all working for the promotion at this time. Gilbert had a parking lot brawl with Lawler, which included Lawler getting body slammed on a car windshield. At one point during the feud, Lawler threw a fireball at Gilbert, which led to a great promo where Gilbert talked with his back to the camera for two minutes, threatening not only Lawler, but his friends and family. At the end of the interview, Eddie faced the camera to show his burned and bandaged face. Eddie would get a victory over Lawler in May and used the film to hype matches at his next stop, the *Continental Wrestling Association*.

Eddie was brought in to book Continental and also worked as the lead heel, bringing in Paul E. Dangerously (Paul Heyman) as his manager. After working a "fan in the crowd" angle with long time friend John Gilliam, which ended with Gilbert giving "the fan" a pile driver, Eddie began feuding with Austin Idol. A creatively booked feud between former partners Ken Wayne and Danny Davis was also creating interest in the territory. Although Gilbert was fired in September, the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* readers voted Gilbert the "Booker of the Year" for this short run. Dave Meltzer, the nephew of rock critic Richard Meltzer, started the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* in 1983 as an insider sheet that reported on the inner workings of the business. Many established wrestlers, hated the "dirt sheets," feeling that the reporting would ultimate decrease interest by both casual fans and true believers. Gilbert thought that newsletters such as the *Observer* and the *Pro Wrestling Torch* were an evolutionary part of the business and actively fostered relationships with the "smart fan" community. This, of course, resulted in more positive reporting for Eddie. Continental owner David Woods let Gilbert go after Eddie claimed he was injured, yet worked a date outside of the territory in Kansas City.

Gilbert returned to *World Championship Wrestling* in October of 1988 and, for a short time, received a major babyface push. He partnered with Bam Bam Bigelow (Scott Bigelow) in matches against Four Horseman members Ric Flair, the WCW champion, and Barry Windham. He teamed with Ron Simmons and worked an excellent match, losing to the Fantastics, Bobby

Fulton and Tommy Rogers, in the finals of a tournament for the U.S. Tag Team titles.

After wrestling Flair and Windham in single matches in January of 1989, Gilbert stated he would bring in a mystery partner to take on the duo. His partner the next week was Ricky Steamboat, returning to wrestling after an extended absence. Flair and Steamboat had worked brilliant matches in the Carolinas in the early 1980s and the studio atmosphere for the tag match was electrifying. Steamboat pinned Flair with a cross body block, which would lead to some of the most exciting single matches of the decade between the two. Eddie continued to work tag team matches against Flair and Windham with different partners including Sting, Steamboat, and Lex Lugar. At the end of February, Gilbert and Rick Steiner beat Steve Williams and Kevin Sullivan for the United States Tag Team straps. By the summer, Gilbert was back working in single matches and his push was quickly over. He worked a program against the Great Muta (Keiji Mutoh), who introduced a completely new set of wrestling moves to the American audience, losing every match. He then teamed up with his old New Fabulous Ones partner, Tommy Rich, working mid card matches against Jack Victory and Mike “Rip” Morgan. He also did several jobs for the Samoan Swat Team, Samu and Fatu (Samula Anoa’i and Solofa Fatu). Gilbert stopped working for WCW at the end of April of 1990, claiming an injury and was eventually let out of his contract. Leaving WCW had amazing recuperative powers for Eddie, who was soon working again in Memphis. However, by this time his marriage to Missy Hyatt had ended. He would later have a very brief marriage to Debra Miceli (wrestler Madusa Miceli/Alundra Blayze). During this run, Gilbert and Lawler did an extremely dangerous stunt. After Doug and Eddie were “fired,” Lawler and figurehead promoter Eddie Marlin followed the men to the studio parking lot. Eddie Gilbert hopped into a car, stomped on the gas, and hit Lawler, who did a bump over the driver side corner of the auto. The television studio and Memphis police were flooded with phone calls, from viewers who thought they saw an unscripted act and that Gilbert tried to kill Lawler. To calm down the situation, Lawler had to appear later in the program and vow vengeance. However, by not having an injury angle, the situation resulted in much less heat than it could have.

After winning the Southern Heavyweight title from Jeff Jarrett, Gilbert had a spirited television ceremony, which included new manager Sam “Bass”

Lowe, Doug Gilbert, and several of the heels of the company, in which Eddie proclaimed himself the new “King of Wrestling.” In addition to working in Memphis, Gilbert appeared in Dallas for Jarrett and worked in the Philadelphia Tri-States promotion for Joel Goodhart. Eddie was also booking Memphis for a short time during this run, but his ambitions, such as bringing in Ricky Steamboat, and the financial realities of the promotion did not mesh. Eddie worked in Memphis through July of 1991, teaming with Jeff Jarrett and his brother, Doug.

Joel Goodhart’s *Tri-State Wrestling* was putting on the hottest independent shows in the country in the early 1990s. Philadelphia was known for having a large number of “smart” fans that appreciated quality ring work, as opposed to the often cartoonish version of wresting promoted by WCW and the WWF. Gilbert had frequently worked on Goodhart’s cards, taking on Cactus Jack (Mick Foley). In August of 1991, the two men were booked in three matches in one night with a simple ambition – to have (1) the best “Falls Count Anywhere” match ever, (2) to have the best “Stretcher Match” ever, and (3) to have the best “Cage Match” ever. While those lofty ambitions may not have been met, the two men gave monumental efforts that became the talk of the industry. Both men were offered jobs with WCW based on their work that evening. Gilbert initially accepted, yet reneged when he found out he would be booked as a babyface.

After Jerry Jarrett stopped promoting in Dallas in 1991, Max Andrews and Joe Pedicino booked shows in the Sportatorium under the banner of the *Global Wrestling Federation*. To their credit, they managed to get an agreement with ESPN to air the fledgling promotion. Eddie was brought in to work as the booker. The company’s champion was the Patriot (Del Wilkes) and Eddie brought in Doug under a hood as “The Dark Patriot.” While the roster did include future stars Sean Waltman, as “The Lightning Kid”, and Marcus Bagwell, as “the Handsome Stranger,” neither the booking nor the roster was particularly inspired. In a bizarre backstage incident, Gilbert was attacked by wrester Jeff Gaylord, who was paid to do so by an independent promoter that was unhappy with Eddie. Gilbert thought the unsuccessful attack was ridiculous – a smart wrestler would have simply split the money with Eddie and worked an injury angle on the promoter.

In May of 1992, Gilbert returned to Memphis, as the “Global Wrestling Federation” champion. Looking sharp in a business suit, Gilbert accused the

USWA (the *United States Wrestling Association*, a new name for the Memphis promotion) of protecting their wrestlers and being afraid to work against the GWF talent. This started the GWF versus USWA feud. Gilbert took the "Unified" World title from Lawler in June. Gilbert worked a singles program with Ricky Morton and then a tag team program with Doug against the Rock 'n' Roll Express. At this point, Memphis had started a business relationship with the *World Wrestling Federation*, which led to Gilbert defending the Unified title against former WWF champion Sgt. Slaughter (Bob Remus). Gilbert lost the strap to the Junkyard Dog in September. Shortly thereafter, Eddie began teaming with Doug and other partners in a long program with the Moondogs.

In 1992, Joel Goodhart sold *Tri-States Wrestling* to Tod Gordon, who rebranded the company as *Eastern Championship Wrestling*. Eddie was brought into book the new territory, with assistance from Paul Heyman. The promotion used established stars, including Don Muraco and Jimmy Snuka, and younger workers including Tommy Cairo, J.T. Smith, and Glen Osbourne. Eddie brought his crown into the territory and pronounced himself the "King of Philadelphia." Eddie often had exciting matches against Terry Funk on the independent scene and the two worked together in this new venture. As was the pattern, Eddie brought Doug along for the ride and the ride did not last long. By August, Eddie left the promotion, due to differences in the proposed direction of the company. Later Paul Heyman would purchase the company and change the name to *Extreme Championship Wrestling*. With its emphasis on quality workers and, alternatively, "hardcore" matches, ECW would have a significant impact on the national wrestling scene in the 1990s.

In 1991, *Wrestling International New Generations*, also known as W*ING, opened in Japan. While the major Japanese promotions featured large American workers and a tremendously physical style of working, W*ING used smaller, independent wrestlers and focused on campy, horror movie characters, such as the Crypt Keeper and Leatherface. Both Doug and Eddie had worked for the company and were booked for a tour in November of 1993. Eddie worked as the masked "Boogie Man" and Doug worked as "Freddy Krueger." During a match in a small gym with a sparse crowd in Kawasaki, Japan, the brothers went into business for themselves, booked their own finish, and then took off their masks while proclaiming loyalty to

Giant Baba (Shohei Baba of *All Japan Pro Wrestling*). It was a remarkably unprofessional act.

In December, Eddie and Doug returned to Memphis. It would be Eddie's last run in the territory that he loved. Drawing back on Memphis history, Eddie claimed to have a wrestling jacket that had been the property of Sam Bass. According to Eddie, Bass needed drinking money one night and sold the jacket for a few bucks. Lawler claimed that the jacket had been borrowed by Tommy Gilbert and should legitimately be Lawler's property. The jacket became a stipulation prize as the two feuded over the Unified title. Eddie did some tremendously deranged interviews during this run, in his self-righteously outraged persona.

By this point, the Memphis promotion was only drawing 1,000 to 1,500 fans per week to the Coliseum. Eddie stayed with the group until the summer. In March, Lawler had won the title from Gilbert at a spot show, promising he would quickly drop the belt back. The next day, Lawler named Randy Hales as the new booker for the promotion, a decision that undoubtedly disappointed Eddie. In May, Gilbert became incensed when Troy Graham (the Dream Machine) was placed in a main event slot instead of him. He did a shoot interview on television, stating he was sick of Brian Christopher being the "handpicked successor" to "The King" and noting he would not be staying long. He finished up the next Monday evening.

Eddie worked in Puerto Rico that summer, but could no longer find regular work in the States. He had burned one bridge too many. As a favor to a long time friend, Jim Cornette agreed to book Eddie in *Smoky Mountain Wrestling* in early 1995. Eddie did one television taping where he was heavily featured to develop future storylines. He immediately left the company to take a booking job in Puerto Rico.

On February 17th, 1995, Eddie Gilbert wrestled in bear in Puerto Rico. The next morning, Ken Wayne, who Eddie had feuded with in his initial Memphis appearances in 1979, discovered his dead body. There have been conflicting reports on the cause of his death. Shortly after Gilbert died, in what may have been a silent tribute to Eddie, the WWF did a fake apology angle with "Men on a Mission" (Nelson Frazier, Jr./"Mo" and Robert Horne/"Mabel) and the Smoking Gunns (Monty Sopp/"Billy Gunn" and Mike Polchlopek/"Bart Gunn").

In retrospect, it is hard to believe that Gilbert was only thirty three years old when he died. Maybe he seemed older because he had been on the public

stage for sixteen years or because his hair was receding or because the territorial wrestling world he entered had been completely transformed by the time of his death. Those that worked with Eddie consistently speak fondly of him as a person and as a performer. At various points, Eddie tried to get into local politics in the Lexington, Tennessee area, but he was not able to successfully transition into a different career. In retrospect, it seems that Eddie pursued his dreams such a single-minded focus, it obliterated his relationships in the business and, ultimately, led to his early death. As the poet Stephen Vincent Benet warned us, “Dreaming men are haunted men.”

Randy Savage

"Oooh…Yeah…."

It is difficult to discuss Randy Savage as a separate entity from the Poffo family, which included his miserly father Angelo and his leaping brother Lanny. So, let's drift back in history to a time when the United States was celebrating victory in World War II and a young man in the United States Navy had abs of steel.

On July 4, 1945, Angelo Poffo set a world record by completing 6,033 sit-ups in four hours, 10 minutes. As he would say many times in his life, "I did 6,000 and I was so happy that I was still alive, I did 33 more sit-ups, one for each year of Jesus Christ's life."

After leaving the service, Poffo began wrestling at a Chicago gym. He had his first professional match in 1949 in Beloit, Wisconsin. Poffo may have gone to the same high school in Hammond, Indiana that produced future wrestlers/promoters Dory Funk, Sr. and Roy Shire (Roy Shropshire). It has been reported that Shire influenced Poffo's bump heavy ring work. He later wore the same cap and gown gimmick that had been popularized by "Professor" Roy Shire.

Working in the Chicago area gave Poffo publicity in a major market. He was paired up with manager Bronco Lubich (Bronko Lupsity), who wore a tuxedo and carried a cane. Lubich would become well known to another generation of wrestling fans in the 1980s as the hopelessly slow referee for the Dallas based *World Class Championship Wrestling* promotion owned by Fritz Von Erich (Jack Adkisson). The general formula for the pair was that Poffo would bump throughout the match for the babyface, Lubich would interfere at the end, and Poffo would get the victory, creating great moral indignation among the paying customers. When Lubich and Poffo would enter a new town, they had a strange habit for wrestlers of their era; they would always make a visit to the city's Merrill Lynch office.

In 1958, Angelo defeated the Wilbur Snyder in Chicago for the U.S. title. This later became the same belt that The Sheik in Detroit would hold for eons. A 1959 main event with Poffo and Lubich against Yukon Eric (Eric Holmback) and Snyder reportedly drew over 15,000 fans to the Cincinnati Gardens.

Poffo received a few pushes in Snyder and Dick the Bruiser's Indianapolis based *World Wrestling Association*. In 1966, Poffo teamed with Chris

Markoff in a tag team named The Devil's Duo, managed by Bobby Heenan. In 1973, he worked in a tag team with Ken Dillinger, named The Graduates, wearing the Roy Shire inspired caps and gowns. Lanny Poffo emulated this attire for his role as "The Genius" in the *World Wrestling Federation* in the 1980s.

For the most part, Angelo Poffo was a journeyman wrestler. While he was a featured performer on occasion, he was not a major star in the business. In the early 1970s, his son Randy Poffo was trying to make it into major league baseball and played in the minor leagues for both the Cardinals and the Reds. In 1973, Lanny Poffo debuted in the business working a match against his father in Aurora, Illinois. Angelo and Lanny would spend the summer of 1973 working for a Phil Golden promotion that was competing against Gulas/Welch. Randy Poffo began wrestling in 1974, while still pursuing his career in baseball, in Florida and in the Atlanta Ann Gunkel promotion as "The Spider." Ironically, twenty eight years later, Randy Poffo, portraying the fearsome grappler Bone Saw McGraw, would wrestle *Spider-Man* in the 2002 box office smash starring Tobey Maguire.

In 1975, all of the Poffos worked for The Sheik's Detroit based promotion. Angelo and Lanny captured that promotion's version of the World Tag Team titles for a short period of time. Randy worked using a bleach blonde surfer gimmick, which must have been amusing.

On February 17, 1976, the Poffos were working in Mobile, Alabama in the Gulf Coast promotion against The British Bulldogs, Edward Heath and John Foley. Foley was an English wrestler that had a reputation as being both a shooter and a bully in the ring. There are several versions of what happened that night. One version is that the Poffos entered the ring with blackjacks (leather billy clubs), but were unsuccessful in beating their opponents senseless with them. Another version is that Angelo, Lanny, and Randy all stormed the ring and beat up Foley in retaliation for working unprofessionally in prior matches. After the match, Gulf Coast regular Rip Tyler (self) reportedly slapped Randy senseless. Guns may have been brandished backstage. The Poffos twelve day run in the promotion ended that night. The family spent most of the rest of the year working low on the cards for Charlotte, North Carolina based Jim Crockett Promotions. (For more information on the colorful career of John Foley, read Heath McCoy's excellent book *Pain and Passion: The History of Stampede Wrestling*).

In 1977, Randy Poffo transformed into Randy Savage and worked for Jim Barnett's Atlanta based promotion. He often wrestled future stars such as Bob Backlund, Tommy Rich, Tony Atlas, David Von Erich, and a young wrestler named Richard Blood, who would gain more fame when rechristened Tito Santana. (Richard Blood is also Ricky Steamboat's real name). Savage did not get his hand raised too regularly during that year, but it must have been a great learning experience. In late 1977, Angelo and Lanny began working for Nick Gulas, who at this point was no longer promoting with Jerry Jarrett. Lanny even worked a time limit draw in February of 1978 against NWA world heavyweight champion Harley Race.
In 1978, Randy Savage acquired a new persona. He became the "Macho Man" Randy Savage. He debuted in the Gulas promotion and received the first major push of his career. Dutch Mantell and Savage had been admiring each other's work and had an idea to turn around poor performance in the territory. They went to booker Tom Renesto and recommended that they be booked against each other in a headline feud. Mantel became one of the first regular recipients of the flying elbow from the top rope, which was not the most enjoyable move in the world to take. On one occasion, Mantel's head hit the mat so hard from the impact of the flying elbow that he blacked out, most likely having experienced a concussion. After headlining one show in Nashville against Mantell, Savage was involved in an altercation at an area Waffle House. Savage initially refused to cooperate with the authorities, but reconsidered after a police dog took a bite out of his Macho backside.
The Poffo family then went to the Canadian Maritimes for several months in 1978, an experience that Lanny recalled as being the best time in his career. By the fall of the year, Savage was back in the Gulas territory feuding with Mantel and Bobby Eaton. Lanny Poffo was in the Pacific Northwest, losing matches to Roddy Piper and Adrian Adonis.
In 1979, there were some interesting developments in Tennessee wrestling. Savage started the year working in Nashville and Chattanooga for Gulas, while also working occasionally for The Sheik in Detroit. In April of 1979, Angelo Poffo began running weekly cards in Elizabethtown and Georgetown, Kentucky under the banner of *International Championship Wrestling* (ICW). In May of 1979, a number of established wrestlers left Ron Fuller's promotion in Knoxville to start their own company. Among them were Ron Garvin, Bob Roop, Bob Orton, Jr., Boris Malenko, and Ron

Wright. This group promoted under the banner of *All-Star Championship Wrestling* and Savage started working with this group.

By the end of 1979, Poffos' ICW was running direct competition against Jerry Jarrett in Kentucky. Since this group was not affiliated with the *National Wrestling Alliance*, it was considered an "outlaw" group. Not only was this new promotion working the same towns as Jarrett, they made consistent grandstand challenges on their television programs to the wrestlers in the other promotions. For example, a Knoxville card, knocked former area headliner/promoter Ron Fuller, boldly advertising a "CHICKEN CHALLENGE, $7,500 VS a CHICKEN, Bob Orton, Jr. vs. Ron FULLER, IF FULLER SHOWS UP." Bill Dundee, Tojo Yamamoto, Jerry Jarrett, and Jerry Lawler were often the target of these challenges. Jarrett years later would state, "Randy Savage and his family were not very smart in their efforts to run against us. They spent far too much of their television time knocking us and not building their talent. I received tapes in which most of the time was spent challenging Lawler and Dundee to matches that they and the fans knew would never take place."

The ICW group even had Randy tape a wrestling promo in front of Jerry Lawler's home in Memphis, showing that "The King" was too scared to come outside and face him. A real life encounter between Randy and Bill Dundee got physical. The two grapplers crossed paths either outside a diner or inside a gym. There are, of course, different versions of what happened. One version is that Dundee pulled a gun on Savage, yet still ended the encounter with a broken jaw. Another version is that Savage sucker punched Dundee and the fight ended after Dundee brandished his weapon. In any event, Dundee had some type of injury and Savage left unscathed. Since Dundee was the number two star for the Jarrett promotion at the time, the ICW crew saw this as a major victory. However, Jarrett refused to acknowledge the promotion on the air, fearing it would only give the group undeserved credibility and recognition to the wrestling fans. Jarrett was right, as the ICW crew did spectacularly unsuccessful business when they tried to promote in Memphis. One arena card that was taped in Memphis for television broadcast clearly had less than twenty fans in attendance.

ICW used a small crew that eventually ran on 22 television markets and had shows in Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Illinois, and Missouri. Lucking into established stars such as Ronnie Garvin, Bob Roop, Bob Orton, Jr., and Boris Malenko helped to give the new promotion credibility.

Ginger The Wrestling Bear was a frequent attraction on small town cards. Bob Roop later reflected on how “The Miser” Angelo Poffo did business to Greg Oliver, “"He'd rent a room, and he'd put 10 guys in the room, in a single room. Here he is 60, or whatever, and he'd sleep under the sink on the floor.” Manager Izzy Slapawitz (real name Jeff Smith) noted that most of the wrestler’s traveled to the towns in the back of the company’s ring truck. Angelo felt that driving a car was for prima donnas.

Others that worked for ICW during its history include “Pistol” Pez Whatley, George Weingeroff, Doug Vines, Jeff Sword, Rip Rogers, and Buddy Landel with some appearances by veterans such as Ox Baker, Thunderbolt Patterson and The Sheik. A young Crusher Broomfield (George Gray) would later gain more fame under the names One Man Gang (which was Ronnie Garvin’s nickname in the ICW promotion) and Akeem in the *World Wrestling Federation.*

Savage won the ICW World title belt from his brother Lanny in the summer of 1979 and kept it until the promotion was about to fold, losing it to family friend Paul Christy in November of 1983. At one point, Savage had made a deal for Bruiser Brody to get the strap, but Brody no showed the event.

When the promotion was active, it had a very strange psychology. Savage regularly defended the “World Title” against his brother Lanny and Ronnie Garvin. At one point, Garvin did an “expose” divulging that Savage’s real name was Poffo and that he was Lanny’s brother (the identity of “The Miser,” Angelo Poffo, remained an ICW mystery). While Savage always had the title, Garvin was forever outsmarting the champ and getting under his skin. In one surreal bit of television, Garvin even did an interview about a real life situation involving Savage being arrested for robbery after getting some five finger discount steaks from a Kentucky grocery store. Not many promotions would advertise that their World Champ had to steal to eat. Reflecting on the ICW experience many years later, Angelo Poffo would say, “Promoters die broke.”

Savage came off as borderline psychotic in ICW. He had developed his trademark interview style, it sounded like his vocal chords had been dipped in gravel every morning. He did interviews while holding snakes, wore blindingly garish robes and did a devastating array of aerial maneuvers, often jumping off the top rope onto his opponent who was outside the ring. A number of wrestlers have noted that Savage had one speed in the ring, that he was always running wide open. In an era that often featured heavy

men doing five minute rest holds, Randy Savage demanded attention every second he was on the camera. There have been few wrestlers more fun to imitate on interviews or that captured the imagination more while performing. (Savage's interview style and "Ooh, Yeah" catchphrase were borrowed from Pampero Firpo. Firpo, whose real name is Juan Kachmanian, looked like a caveman with thick, long, untamed hair and had an extremely aggressive wrestling style. After retiring from the ring, the "Wild Bull of the Pampas" went in a decidedly different direction. He became a mailman.)

When ICW could no longer run a full schedule in 1983, Savage began negotiating with Bill Watts to enter *Mid-South Wrestling*. However, Watts told Savage that he needed to make amends with Jarrett and encouraged him to go to Memphis. In late 1983, Lanny Poffo debuted in the Mid-South promotion, often teaming with a young Rick Rood (later Rick Rude) losing matches to Jim Cornette's Midnight Express (Dennis Condrey and Bobby Eaton). While Poffo probably was never the type of wrestler that Watts would have given a big push, having a new booker from Memphis probably didn't help his prospects either. That wrestler, who had a fully healed jaw, was none other than Bill Dundee.

Lawler was not sure whether to trust Savage when he initially came into the territory. The promotion booked a Lawler/Savage main event in Lexington, before Savage had been seen on Memphis television, which drew more than 8,000 fans. At that point in time, the Lawler/Savage main event set the attendance and gate record for the city. Even more importantly for Savage, his performance gained Lawler's trust. The match was smartly booked to end in a no decision, giving the promotion the option to build toward a rematch.

In December of 1983, Savage debuted on Memphis wrestling, storming into the studio like an unscripted invasion. Figurehead promoter Eddie Marlin ordered Savage to leave while Randy and his father unfurled a banner that stated "MACHO MAN WANTS KING." Savage went on to destroy a few jobbers with pile drivers and a flying elbow, smashed his own head with a chair while Angelo proudly gloated, "That's my son!" Savage ended his appearance by declaring "Lawler's dad's dead!" Lawler used the opportunity to deliver a classic line in his promo, "Savage, you've been saying that you want me for years. Well, I'm not hard to find. Every Monday night, I'm at the Mid-South Coliseum."

The initial match in Memphis drew over 8,000 fans, a very good night for Memphis during this time period. However, the big money was in Lexington, Kentucky. ICW was based in Lexington and the Memphis promotion ran a monthly loaded card there. The building, primarily known as the home for the University of Kentucky Wildcats basketball team, seated over 23,000. Lawler described the build up to the match to Scott Bowden in 2011, "It had gotten so personal between us that we knew it would draw. That was always our philosophy–'personal issues draw money.' There were still plenty of bad feelings, as we felt they were running opposition and trying to cut into our business, while these ICW guys were just trying to survive and eat. The hatred between two us had so much credibility in the fans' eyes that we didn't even really advertise the first match all that much. Randy and I went to Lexington and nearly sold out the building, which was unheard of at Rupp Arena. We did it like a shoot, where we had an ICW referee and one of our own referees, I think Paul Morton, to keep it fair. After everything that had gone done, I guess you could say I was a little concerned if we could work together, but we never had any problems. I heard from so many guys later who worked with him that he was always so paranoid about his matches and wanted to work out everything in advance. Randy was never that way with me. He was intense yet laid-back, very easy to work with–I think we had some good matches."

After feuding with Lawler, Savage had an entertaining series of matches with Dutch Mantel and then became a member of Jimmy Hart's First Family. He also worked an extensive feud with Austin Idol and then worked in a tag team with his brother Lanny when he came to the territory in the summer of 1984. In their most memorable match as a tag team, the brothers faced Ricky Morton and Robert Gibson, The Rock 'N' Roll Express. Savage gave Morton a pile driver through the ringside table, snapping the table in two. This feud got so hot over the summer, what started as a mid-card match ended up as a main event in the territory.

The Rock 'n' Roll Express had been put together as a tag team to work on spot shows with Lawler when the Fabulous Ones where headlining elsewhere. Lawler went to a magazine rack, looked at rock music publications of the era like *Circus* and *Hit Parader*, and gave Morton and Gibson headbands and accessories to wear emulating the style of the popular rock groups of that time. In Memphis, the duo followed the

Fabulous Ones and was seen as a teenybopper alternative to the more mature Fabs. However, they got over much bigger on a national basis and were one of the top babyface tag teams of the 1980s. Morton was so effective at selling the offense of his opposing heels, even today when a babyface tag team wrestler is selling offense for sympathy, it is sometimes referred to as "playing Ricky Morton."

By the fall of that year, Savage was turned babyface to team with Lawler against Rick Rude and King Kong Bundy. Lawler, "Randy was sort of like 'Handsome' Jimmy [Valiant] in that sense. He was so off the wall and entertaining, even as a heel, that gradually the people started to like him. In those days, you listened to what the fans wanted and gave it to them. And just like that, Randy was hot again, teaming with me." After that feud cooled off, Randy returned to teaming with Lanny, facing Eddie and Tommy Gilbert.

Randy had one more heel run and set of main event matches before leaving the territory. He not only beat Lawler for the Southern Heavyweight title, but he also defeated perennial AWA World Heavyweight Champion Nick Bockwinkel, while Bockwinkel was between title runs. Savage also had a short lived tag team run during this time with "Dr. D." David Schultz, who had been fired from the *World Wrestling Federation* after slapping John Stossel of ABC's *20/20* program and after trying to attack Mr. T. backstage at a WWF event. Schultz, who like Savage had a borderline dangerous persona, wore some rather odd ring apparel during this run, namely a cheap t-shirt with a swastika symbol design. While Savage's pay in Memphis was surely better than during his ICW days, he still supplemented his income by selling Amway. (Imagine the sales pitch, "Look at this cleaning product! Dig it! Freak out"!).

During the spring of 1985, Savage received the offer to come to the *World Wrestling Federation*. He initially balked at going, feeling a sense of loyalty to Jerry Jarrett. When he did leave, he insisted on giving two weeks' notice and doing jobs for Lawler on his way out of the territory. The loser leave town match on 3 June, 1985, drew over 9,000 fans and was one of the best matches in Memphis during that year.

Of course, Savage became a legend in wrestling after entering the *World Wrestling Federation*. By this point, he had been working on his "Macho Man" persona for over seven years. His aggressive, high flying style immediately drew the attention of the fans and his wife, Elizabeth Hulette,

was introduced as his manager, the lovely “Miss Elizabeth.” The on screen dynamics of the relationship between Savage and Miss Elizabeth had an appeal beyond the traditional male viewing audience for wrestling. While most females in wrestling have been portrayed as evil backstabbing vixens, Miss Elizabeth was the eternally wholesome princess next door. Her sweetness contrasted with Randy’s evil doings made for a superb storyline contrast.

In real life, there was constant tension in the couple’s relationship. Stories abound of Randy’s strange behavior including locking Elizabeth in backstage rooms, so she couldn’t speak to other men; checking her odometer at home, so he could determined where she had traveled; and buying her TV dinners when he traveled, so she would not need to leave home to eat.

Savage was also different from most wrestlers once he reached the WWF in that he wanted to lay out each specific move in the match. While this became a more common practice later, during that timeframe, it was unheard of. Generally, the wrestlers would be given the time allotted for the match, the finish, and the heel would call the match in the ring. Wayne Ferris (The Honky Tonk Man) had a run with Savage in the WWF where they did basically the same match for several months at house shows. And they met every night and went over every move that would occur.

His match against Ricky Steamboat at WrestleMania III was voted “Match of the Year” by the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter*. At WrestleMania IV, Savage won a tournament for the WWF Championship, which he held for over a year. As a worker, Savage was able to consistently get good matches out of Hogan and even carried The Ultimate Warrior to an exciting match at WrestleMania VII. In his first few years with the company, he seemed intent on stealing the show every night and he often did.

He won the WWF Championship for a second time at WrestleMania VIII, defeating Ric Flair. The Savage/Flair feud was built up by a storyline about Flair having slept with Elizabeth. In real life, Elizabeth was divorcing Savage at that time.

During his time in the WWF, Savage crossed over to a more mainstream audience by becoming the spokesperson for Slim Jim snack products. “Need a little excitement? Snap into a Slim Jim! Oooh…yeah!”

Savage transitioned into a commentator role for the WWF prior to joining WCW in late 1993. While Vince McMahon thought that Randy’s days as a

headline performer were behind him, he went on to have many successful feuds in WCW. He held the WCW World Heavyweight Championship on four occasions, but the way the company was continuously switching the title to different performers made it less prestigious than the WWF title. Savage stayed with WCW until 2000 and then had a short run with the *Total Nonstop Action* promotion in 2004 and 2005.

In retrospect, it was truly astonishing to watch Savage leap frog from a small Kentucky promotion to the relative big time of Memphis wrestling to the bright lights of the *World Wrestling Federation*, becoming one of the biggest stars in the business.

While Angelo Poffo couldn't compete with Jarrett, he did pull a miserly trick on him. ICW was no longer an active promotion in 1984, but ran a limited schedule due to existing television contracts. Jarrett provided Memphis wrestling tapes for Angelo to run in his timeslots. After Savage, Ric Rude, and King Kong Bundy became major stars, Angelo sold the Memphis tapes to Ron Martinez and they were distributed as part of the "Wrestling Gold" video series. For Angelo, possession was probably more than nine tenths of the law.

Randy "Macho Man" Savage passed away on 20 May, 2011. The heavens must have been filled with flying elbows on that night.

Jerry Lawler

"Who's the smartest wrestler in the world today, and why am I?"

Since the early 1970s, Jerry "The King" Lawler has been synonymous with Memphis wrestling. Few men in the history of the industry ever drew more money than Lawler. With his endless wit, unparalleled ring psychology, and tremendous looking worked punches, Lawler thrilled and infuriated Memphis wrestling crowds for decades. Equally reviled as a heel and beloved as a babyface, Lawler had the ability to work exciting matches against performers that ranged in experience from traveling World Champions to young talent just starting in the business. The ultimate wrestling survivor, after more than four decades in wrestling, Lawler is still one of the lead announcers for *World Wrestling Entertainment* and is still in demand as a performer.

Lawler grew up in Memphis, but his family followed his father's job with the Ford Motor Company to Ohio in 1958. Living near Cleveland, Lawler became a wrestling fan, watching The Sheik (Ed Farhat) and Bobo Brazil (Houston Harris). After approximately six years in Ohio, his family moved back to Memphis and Jerry attended Treadwell High School. While Lawler was attending high school, recent Treadwell alum Jimmy Hart was touring the country with The Gentrys. Lawler began attending the weekly wrestling cards at the Ellis Auditorium, where his father worked as an usher. The future "King" began to draw caricatures and cartoons of the wrestlers while at the matches. He mailed a set of his drawings to Lance Russell and was stunned to tune in one morning and see his artwork on the announcer's desk. Later in the program, Lance used Lawler's drawings to recap the previous Monday night's card. After several weeks of submitting drawings, Lawler was invited on the air to show his work. While Lawler recalls sitting like a statue when he was on the air, Lance has said that Lawler was a natural, even during his first televised segment.

Lawler continued to attend matches and root for the bad guys. He had a special affinity for the mystique of the masked men known as the Blue Infernos, Frank Martinez and Gilberto "Pepe" Melendez, better known as Gypsy Joe. Jackie Fargo, Lawler's hero, hired Jerry to draw caricatures to hang on the walls at the Southern Frontier Lounge and Restaurant, a local bar and steak establishment owned by Fargo and country singer Eddie

Bond. The men also opened a sign shop to take advantage of Lawler's artistic ability.

Lawler's artwork opened another door when he entered a contest sponsored by Scott Shannon, who was the hottest disc jockey in Memphis at the time and still works in radio today. Impressed by Shannon's star status, Lawler started working as a deejay at Memphis State University (now known as the University of Memphis), where he had received a commercial arts scholarship. He was later hired for a slot on KWAM, whose program director was none other than Eddie Bond. It speaks highly for both Lawler's self confidence and abilities that established performers such as Jackie Fargo, Eddie Bond, and Schott Shannon all saw potential in the teenager.

One day while Lawler was working at the sign shop, wrestler Jerry Vickers dropped in, searching for Jackie Fargo. Vickers was looking for a job with the Gulas/Welch promotion, but was working for Aubrey Griffith's small independent promotion in West Memphis, Arkansas. Lawler had enrolled in Memphis State's small college wrestling program and was looking for an opportunity to enter the professional ranks. After Griffith passed on booking Lawler, the future King slyly noted he could give the promotion free publicity on his radio program. The next week, Lawler and Jerry Vickers were working the main event for Griffith. After several weeks of wrestling on the West Memphis cards, Fargo got Lawler a position with the Nick Gulas promotion, partially so he would stop promoting the West Memphis cards. Lawler was thrilled.

Lawler broke into the business, as many rookies did in the territory, by facing Tojo Yamamoto. Tojo would beat rookies senseless with his arsenal of chops as a test to see whether the wrestler really wanted to stay in the business. Lawler passed the test. On 17 August, 1970, Lawler debuted at the Ellis Auditorium, dropping a match to Mack York (who was the brother of area referee Paul Morton and, therefore, the uncle of Ricky Morton). As a rookie, Lawler was spending his time doing jobs to established performers on television on the Gulas circuit and even made a few trips to Sam Muchnick's promotion in St. Louis in early 1971, doing jobs for Bob Geigel and Harley Race. According to Jerry Jarrett, early in his career Lawler was constantly grinning in his matches, no matter what was occurring. Of course, later Lawler would become an expert at expressing emotion through his facial expressions. As a rookie, Lawler was often used as a referee and as a wrestler by spot show promoter Buddy Wayne (Dwayne Peale). Buddy

was an early believer that Lawler was going to make significant money as a wrestler.

In 1971, Lawler was sent to Bill Golden's Tri-State promotion based in Montgomery, Alabama. The change in promotion was either due to Lawler's refusal to travel to a town where he was booked (according to Jerry Jarrett) or because Lawler treated Jarrett sarcastically, not understanding that Jarrett was booking the territory (Lawler's version of events). Bill Golden's father-in-law was Roy Welch and the Tri-State group basically acted as a developmental territory for Gulas and Welch. (Bill Golden was also the father of long time territorial wrestler Jimmy Golden). Working in Alabama gave Lawler the opportunity to have competitive matches on a regular basis with young and established talent. During this run, Lawler worked with Jim White (who was using the name Woodrow Bass) and Sam Bass. Bass and Lawler connected immediately, sharing the same penchant for practical jokes. During this run, Lawler won the Tri-State Tag Team Titles with "brother" Steve Lawler. Many years later, "Steve Lawler" would work in Memphis for a short time as Steve Kyle.

On 27 April, 1972, Lawler returned to the Memphis circuit, which had moved to the new Mid South Coliseum. Lawler teamed with Jim White, under the management of Jim "Cashbox" Kent," and dropped a match to Tommy Gilbert and Oni Wiki Wiki. The next match between the four men, billed as the "Tag Battle of the Year," saw White and Lawler go over. For the next few months, White and Lawler worked as a mid card heel team in Memphis. Lawler would later state the chemistry wasn't right with Kent, who wanted too much of the spotlight in Lawler's opinion. On 23 August, White and Lawler worked in Nashville with their new manager, Sam Bass. On 13 September, the team had their first main event in a major city, headlining a Nashville card in a six man tag with Lawler, White, and George Hultz facing Len Rossi, Joey Rossi, and Kevin Sullivan. The heels had Sam Bass in their corner and the babyfaces had Roy Lee Welch in theirs. (Roy Lee was the son of Lester Welch and the nephew of promoter Roy Welch. In the 1980s, Roy Lee worked in Continental as "The King of Wrestling," even using the "Sunrise" fanfare that Lawler used as his intro music). White and Lawler stayed in the main events in Nashville for the next several weeks. On 20 December, White and Lawler faced Jerry Jarrett and Tojo Yamamoto at the Nashville Fairgrounds Arena. It was a sign of things to come.

By early 1973, White and Lawler were working main events both in Nashville and in Memphis (that is to say, both ends of the territory). The main babyfaces were Jerry Jarrett, Tojo Yamamoto, and Jackie Fargo. When the lead babyfaces worked against big heels like Don and Al Greene, they spent most of the match selling for the bigger, somewhat plodding, heels. Lawler enjoyed taking big bumps and loved to sell his opponent's offense. Main event workers could look much more impressive against White and Lawler, who got their heat by being cowardly heels or by interference from Sam Bass. White and Lawler could put over the babyfaces the entire match, get a cheap win with a chain or throwing powder, and have more heat for their match the next week. Jarrett described the tandem as an Ed McMahon/Johnny Carson duo, with White playing the straight man for Lawler's antics. By March of 1973, Jerry Lawler had been in professional wrestling for less than three years and he was working against his idol, Jackie Fargo, in tag team matches with over 10,000 fans in attendance. On 2 April, White and Lawler faced Yamamoto and Roughhouse Fargo with the heels defending their Southern Tag Team belts. The attendance was reported at 11,118 – the largest indoor crowd in Memphis wrestling history. Attendance for the same main event the following week as reportedly 11,128; yet another record crowd.

On 31 July, Lawler and Jarrett faced each other in a singles main event, which drew over 8,000 fans. While Memphis had traditionally been a tag team territory, Lawler was about to change that. The Lawler and Jim White combination ended their lucrative and memorable run in August. Lawler ended 1973 working in single matches and working in tag team matches with "The Scorpion" (Don Duffy, whose real name was Don Quigley) and Al Greene. Lawler wasn't pushed as much later in that year, which coincided with Jerry Jarrett taking the booker job in Atlanta for Jim Barnett. By December, Lawler was making appearances in Atlanta, as well as working for the Gulas/Welch territory.

From January through April of 1974, Lawler primarily worked in the Atlanta territory. Jim Barnett was in a promotional war for the city with Ann Gunkel and Jerry Jarrett's booking for Barnett was turning the tide in his favor. While in Atlanta, Lawler formed tag teams with Bobby Shane, Bobby Duncum, Mr. Wrestling #2, and Art Nelson. He also feuded with Roy Welch's grandson, Robert Fuller. Tojo Yamamoto and Jackie Fargo were brought into the Georgia territory for a few shows during this

timeframe. In preparation for his return, Lawler also worked a few critical shows in Memphis. He wasn't coming back as just another heel on the card. He was coming back as royalty.

Jackie Fargo had been the top star of the territory after making Tennessee his home in the 1960s. Lawler came back to Memphis as Fargo's partner, but quickly turned against him. The promotion basically made the storyline the real life issue, who was going to be the top star of Memphis wrestling. In one of the interviews, Lawler stated he was going to be "The New King." Bobby Shane was working the "King" gimmick in Georgia and loaned Lawler a crown and cape to wear with the storyline. Lawler has stated that he felt somewhat silly the first time he donned his royal accessories, but he received a rabid reaction from the studio audience. Lawler not only bested Fargo in the program, but also transitioned from Jerry Lawler to Jerry "The King" Lawler. In the documentary *Memphis Heat*, Jarrett said, "When Jerry was just a kid, I recognized this self-omnipotence that he felt." Nobody could play a smug, arrogant heel, one who held both his opponent and his audience with utter contempt and disdain, like a young Jerry Lawler. As a heel, he liked to win his singles matches by using a chain, throwing powder, or throwing a fireball for the bigger angles. One of his favorite tactics was the "hide the chain" match, where the audience could see the foreign object, but the hapless referee could never catch him in the act.

The summer was the biggest money making opportunity for the territory and Memphis wrestling exploded during the summer of 1974. Lawler started a feud with Ricky Gibson, the older brother of Robert Gibson from the Rock 'n' Roll Express. In his youth, Ricky displayed excellent athletic ability and the feud between the two young eager stars clicked with the Memphis audience. Their first main event drew over 6,000 fans. The following week (27 May), over 9,000 fans came out to see the action. On 3 June, Lawler and Gibson not only sold out the Coliseum, but it was reported that approximately 1,000 fans were turned away at the door. The two men swapped the NWA "Southern Junior Heavyweight" title, which was about to lose its "Junior" adjective, and then Lawler faced Fargo again in a series of sell out events.

Jarrett then decided to push Lawler as a contender for the NWA World Heavyweight Championship. He did so in a unique way, establishing a program called the "Quest for the Title." Each week, Lawler would face one of the top stars in the business as he worked toward a shot against Jack

Brisco. Ironically, the first two men Lawler faced, The Sheik and Bobo Brazil, were the same wrestlers that Lawler watched on Ohio television when he was eight years old. Most of the matches ended in disputed finishes, but were structured in a way that the heel Lawler could claim victory each week. Other wrestlers that Lawler faced were Mr. Wrestling # 2, Dick the Bruiser, Rufus R. Jones, Robert Fuller, and Jerry Brisco.
During the “Quest for the Gold,” Lawler promoted his World Title match against Brisco with an appearance on Memphis radio station WMPS, 680 AM (“The Great 68”) . Lawler hyped the event with popular morning disc jockey Rick Dees (Rigdon Osmond Dees III), who was a few years and a “Disco Duck” away from national stardom.
On 16 September, over 10,000 fans watched as Lawler took on Jack Brisco for the title. While Lawler was a hated heel, he was still the hometown boy that the audience always rooted for against World Champions. Jack Brisco was a legitimate world class athlete, who won the NCAA Wrestling National Championship in 1965. In the match, Lawler got the three count after using a chain, but referee Tommy Marlin reversed the decision after discovering the foreign object in the ring. Lawler would later state that the match with Brisco gave him credibility for future World Title matches. It probably even meant more to Jerry Jarrett. "Eddie Graham and I stood at the back of the Mid-South Coliseum...we were both very emotional. Brisco was Eddie's man, he loved him, he groomed him and he nurtured him to become the World champion. Lawler was my man. That night, it almost felt like our sons were out there really fighting for the World title. That was such a fun time of my life."
The following week, Lawler faced Andre the Giant. There was nothing noteworthy about that particular match, but later in Lawler’s career, Andre faced Lawler and it ended with the Giant losing via count out. Lawler quickly had pictures submitted to wrestling photographer/journalist Bill Apter, who ran a major story in one of the monthly wrestling magazines that were published throughout the country titled “The Night a Midget Beat a Giant.” Vince McMahon, Sr. was so incensed by the article, which stated that his invaluable touring attraction had been beat, he made it a focal point at an annual *National Wrestling Alliance* membership meeting. Lawler apologized for the “miscommunication.” When Lawler appears on independent cards today, he stills sells photographs of him wrestling against Andre.

In February of 1975, Lawler left Memphis again to work in Georgia. Bill Dundee has stated that Lawler was out of the territory because Lawler did not believe he should have been working in the smaller towns. Jarrett, who was always about the bottom line, had a different interest in the business than Lawler, who was more interested in the fame and the associated benefits. Lawler wrestled against Rocky Johnson in Georgia and also won the prestigious Macon Tag Team Title straps with Don Greene over Don Muraco and Robert Fuller. Other opponents included Ray Candy, Robert Fuller, Jerry Brisco, Larry Zybyszko, Ricky Gibson, Dusty Rhodes, and Bob Backlund. Lawler finished his run in Georgia at the end of July. Lawler returned to Memphis for a few weeks in August, but worked low on the cards. In September, Lawler went to Florida, teaming with Don Greene and managed by Sam Bass working as "The Masked Superstars," in a feud against Ricky Gibson and Jimmy Golden. He also worked some opening matches without the hood. In was a short stay in the Sunshine State. Lawler returned to Memphis on 27 October to face the Mongolian Stomper (Archie Gouldie) in a "Loser Leaves Town" match. Gouldie had been the focal point in Memphis in Lawler's absence, but the returning King ousted the Stomper. Lawler was back to stay.

In 1976, Lawler worked with three new opponents – Stan "Plowboy" Frazier, Rocky Johnson (Wayde Bowles), and Terry Funk. Pascagoula, Mississippi native Stan Frazier had worked in professional wrestling since 1960, often for Gulas/Welch. He may have worked using more aliases than any other wrestler, including "The Convict," "Congorilla," "Big Tex," "The Pascagoula Plowboy," "The Lone Ranger," and about a dozen more. In 1976, he was introduced in Memphis by Lawler as somebody that had never wrestled. According to the storyline, Lawler and Sam Bass were driving in Mississippi and saw the huge "Plowboy" working in a field. Frazier stood approximately 6'10" and weighed approximately 400 pounds, although he was often billed as being taller and heavier. Frazier was a limited performer, but stood out as a large man in a territory of smaller workers. As the story unfolded, Bass and Lawler would keep the country bumpkin Frazier happy by buying him "expensive" gifts. The fans began to sympathize with Frazier, who was clearly being used by the manipulative heels.

Jerry Jarrett tried to convince Plowboy he was being used, but Frazier didn't believe it. Jarrett then did a segment stating that a diamond is the hardest substance on Earth and is unbreakable. Jarrett then took a claw

hammer and smashed one of the gift “diamonds” into dust, much to the delight of the crowd and to the shock of the Plowboy. Jarrett did a masterful job telling the story and Dave Brown would later call this “the most mesmerizing” angle he ever saw.

The angle turned the overalls wearing Plowboy into a babyface for a series of matches against Lawler. In real life, Frazier was known to be quite a character, often setting up shop in the dressing room and selling items such as “Rolex” watches (or reasonable facsimiles), shoes, and even firearms. In the 1980s, he had a run with the *World Wrestling Federation* as “Uncle Elmer” and legitimately married Joyce Stazko on a WWF *Saturday Night’s Main Event* program. When the two kissed, the future governor of Minnesota, Jesse “The Body” Ventura, stated, “Looks like two carp in the Mississippi River going after the same piece of corn.” Plowboy worked regularly in Memphis over the years and passed away from complications resulting from diabetes in 1992.

The “Soul Man” Rocky Johnson was the son-in-law of wrestler Peter Maivia and had been in the wrestling business since the mid 1960s. After being in the business over a decade, Johnson had worked in Canada, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Georgia, Florida, and Texas, often receiving major pushes due to his outstanding physique and strong work in the ring. During June of 1976, the mainstream sports world was focused on a boxing versus wrestling match between Muhammad Ali and Antonio Inoki. Jarrett decided to promote the same concept before the Ali event took place. Johnson, who would not come in without a guarantee, had boxed when he was young and was billed as a former “sparring partner of George Foreman.” The event was hyped with news weigh-ins and interviews. With over 11,000 fans in attendance, Lawler won the event, which was most assuredly more entertaining that Ali versus Inoki. In the latter contest, the sides could not agree to a predetermined finish, so Inoki spent the entire match on his back trying to kick Ali, much to the displeasure of both the viewing and paying audiences. Johnson and Lawler faced each other again on 12 July, in a “boxer versus wrestler” event, but Johnson did not wear gloves. Johnson won that contest in front of over 10,000 fans. Johnson would return in November and become the first African American holder of the “Southern Heavyweight” title. At this point in time, Rocky’s son Dwayne Johnson was four years old. A few decades later, Dwayne “The

Rock” Johnson would become one of the biggest stars in the history of the wrestling business.

On 22 August, 1976, Terry Funk defended the NWA World Heavyweight Title against Lawler, drawing over 10,000 fans. Terry grew up in the wrestling business as the son of Dory Funk and brother of Dory Funk, Jr. Dory Funk, Jr. held the World Title from February 1969 until March of 1973. In December of 1975, Terry Funk beat Jack Brisco for the title in Miami, Florida. While his brother Dory had the persona of a serious wrestler and excelled in working traditional amateur maneuvers into his matches, Terry was a much more dynamic and unpredictable performer. He could work as a soft spoken babyface, but truly excelled as a heel, where he transformed into a vicious, almost psychotic character. Funk came back on 18 October for another title defense. On one of these occasions, Lawler left the belt with the ring and immediately had pictures made wearing the NWA Title. While Funk probably thought that kind of self promotion was humorous, this break of wrestling protocol reportedly legitimately upset the next NWA World Champion, Harley Race.

In 1981, Funk would return to Memphis as one of the men Jimmy Hart brought into the territory to dethrone Lawler. On 23 March, the two men had a tremendously exciting match. In the no disqualification contest, Hart gave Funk a chair and Funk worked over Lawler’s leg with several chair shots, then placed Lawler in a spinning toe hold. Lawler eventually regained the advantage and to the delight of the rabid crowd, smashed Funk’s knee repeatedly with a chair. As Funk slithered out of the ring, Lawler followed with additional chair shots on the floor of the arena. Lawler managed to jump back into the ring and win the match via count out. One of the fans enjoying the match was Jim Cornette, who was working as a ringside photographer. Decades later when Cornette was hired to oversee the WWE’s developmental program, he would often show trainees tapes of Jerry Lawler’s matches in Memphis to demonstrate how a sympathetic yet strong babyface worked.

The program with Funk eventually led to the “Empty Arena” match, a concept developed by Funk to further the feud. Lance Russell has said that the match was the “eeriest” thing he had ever been involved with in wrestling. Before the match started, Funk cursed a blue streak at Lance Russell, as he waited for Lawler to arrive. When Lawler did appear, he was somewhat humorously wearing his full “King” regalia, which caused Funk

to exclaim, “Look at that idiot! Don’t you realize that there’s nobody here!” The match itself was nothing special, Lawler later stated, “I thought it sucked,” but the ending was gut wrenchingly dramatic. Funk had a jagged piece of wood and screamed “I’m going to get his eye,” while he attempted to do so. Lawler was able to get off the mat and kick Funk in the elbow, driving the wood into Terry’s face. Funk juiced near his eye and began screaming in a high pitched voice, “I can’t see! Help me, please, help me! MY EYE! MY EYE!” It was one of the most memorable (and imitated) moments in the history of Memphis wrestling.

In 1981 and 1982, Lawler made several appearances in Florida to continue working with Funk. In one memorable promo, Funk stated that Lawler wanted to be a real Floridian. Funk decided he wanted to know what it felt like to be a true “Florida cracker” and poured a quart of oil over his head to find out. It’s obvious that Funk was in no small amount of discomfort when the oil dripped into his eyes. Several years later, Funk would leave wrestling to work in a number of movies, including *Over the Top* with Sylvester Stallone and *Road House* with Patrick Swayze. In 1989, Funk returned to *World Championship Wrestling* and had an outstanding feud with Ric Flair. He returned to Memphis in 1990, beating Lawler for the “Unified World Title” on 5 November, 1990. On August 28, 2004, after the Memphis territory had been out of business for almost a decade, a main event featuring Terry Funk and Corey Maclin against Lawler and Jimmy Hart drew an eye popping 5,000 fans to the Mid-South Coliseum. Funk delivered some extraordinary promos leading to the match, making fun of Lawler’s cosmetic plastic surgery and stating the need to have “finality.” Reflecting on his career, Lawler once called Funk “one of the most enjoyable guys to work with.”

Lawler started 1977 with feuds against the Mongolian Stomper (drawing over 11,000 fans on 2 January) and Bob Armstrong (drawing over 10,500 on 20 February). In March, Jarrett broke away from Nick Gulas and, to keep Lawler in the fold, Lawler was given 33% of the profits in Memphis (just the city, not the entire territory). Lawler now had a business stake in the promotion. The first card in the Cook Convention Center, a main event between Lawler and Armstrong on 20 March, drew a crowd of 8,256. For Memphis wrestling fans, except for moving to another building for a short timeframe, it was a seamless transition. Two weeks later, Lawler drew an even bigger crowd at the Cook Convention Center, facing Rocky Johnson.

By 24 April, Lance Russell had returned to the promotion and the company was back in the Mid-South Coliseum, drawing close to 8,700 as Johnson faced Harley Race. Any fears that Lawler and Jarrett had in opening their new company must have quickly dissipated. By May, Nick Gulas had stopped promoting in Memphis.

Since Tojo Yamamoto and Jackie Fargo stayed with Gulas, Jarrett received assistance from Florida promoter Eddie Graham who sent Dusty Rhodes and Paul Orndoff to work some dates in Memphis. From July through September of 1977, Lawler and Bill Dundee worked their first extended feud, drawing large crowds to see a variety of stipulations matches. At the end of the program, both Bill Dundee and his wife, Beverly, had lost their hair. After beating Bill Dundee on 13 September, a heel Jerry Lawler "retired" to focus on his music career. Lawler's short retirement transitioned into his new feud with "Handsome" Jimmy Valiant, which continued into 1978. After his feud with Valiant ended, Lawler had his extended program with Joe LeDuc.

As a babyface, Lawler would sell the offense of his opponents for most of the match, making his opponents appear indestructible. Then, when it looked like Lawler was going down in defeat, his face would turn flush with anger, he'd pull the wrestling strap off of his shoulder, and start his inevitable comeback. Most opponents fell victim to his fist drop off of the second rope.

In 1978, the Memphis promotion stopped using the NWA World Champion for their title defenses and started using the *American Wrestling Association.* Jerry Jarrett had been campaigning for a short title run for Jerry Lawler and had no luck with the NWA Board of Directors. In the 1970s, one of the main criteria for being selected as the World Champion was that the wrestler had to be legitimately tough, coming from the old school thinking that the wrestler could be double crossed by an opponent at any time. Lawler was an extremely talented performer, but not a trained shooter. Jarrett thought he might have more luck convincing the sole AWA owner, Verne Gagne, for a title run versus trying to persuade the entire NWA Board. An additional reason for the change may have been the lack of ring chemistry between Harley Race and Jerry Lawler. While Race did draw a sellout crowd when he defended the belt against Rocky Johnson on 1 March, 1977, when he wrestled Lawler to a one hour draw on 11 December, 1977, the usually raucous Memphis crowd was strangely muted.

While Race occasionally took big bumps, in general he didn't display the type of vulnerability that a touring champion needed to escalate a local star. On 21 August, 1978, Lawler faced Nick Bockwinkel for the first time in Memphis. Bockwinkel was managed by Bobby Heenan who interfered in the match, causing a disqualification. (In wrestling logic, a title could not change hands due to a champion being disqualified. Why the champions didn't start beating the referee silly as soon as the bell rung is beyond me.) Bockwinkel was a second generation wrestler who started his career in the mid 1950s. He played the part of the World Champion to the hilt, dressing in stylish suits, wearing designer sunglasses, and being billed as living in Beverly Hills, California. His articulate interview style and appearance clearly sent the message, "I am better than you," but he did not play the role in an exaggerated, over the top manner. In the ring, he was a tremendously skilled mat wrestler, an excellent psychologist, and could be a fine brawler as needed. Bockwinkel and Lawler would have a number of exciting matches over the years, with a broad range of stipulations. Lawler seemingly was always on the verge of capturing the title and Bockwinkel always retained the belt by the skin of his teeth. At one point when Rick Martel was the AWA Champion, Bockwinkel still defended the belt that he really did not hold in Memphis, because the promotion was concerned that the prototypical scientific babyface Martel would not draw in Memphis. (Martel later defended the belt against Lawler in Nashville and did a fine job using aggressive heel type tactics). As fine a wrestler as Curt Henning was, it was somewhat disappointing that when Lawler won the AWA World Heavyweight Title in 1988 that it wasn't against Nick Bockwinkel. Lawler and Bockwinkel were masters that could manipulate the emotions of the audience like skilled orchestra conductors. Some fans consider the matches that Lawler had with Bockwinkel the best of Lawler's career.

On the business side of the house, during the summer of 1978, Jarrett unsuccessfully tried to challenge Nick Gulas in Chattanooga. Simultaneously, Nick Gulas tried to challenge Jarrett in Louisville, Kentucky. Neither side had success and by the end of the year, the two former business partners started to exchange some talent. Bill Dundee and Lawler appeared on a few Nick Gulas cards and on 29 January, 1979, Jackie Fargo returned to team with Lawler against Austin Idol and Mil Mascaras. Tojo Yamamoto returned to Memphis the following week.

In 1979, Lawler had extended programs with Austin Idol and the Mongolian Stomper. After Bill Dundee was selected as “The Wrestler of the Year” and received a shot at Nick Bockwinkel, Lawler turned heel on Dundee ending his hot babyface run. Lawler then worked a one hour draw with Bockwinkel on 27 August and started a program with Dundee. It was during this timeframe that Jimmy Hart began to manage Lawler.
Frustrated with the inability to get Lawler a World Title run with the NWA or the AWA, Jarrett introduced the *Championship Wrestling Association* (CWA) World Heavyweight Title in 1979. The first CWA “World Champion” was Pat McGinnis, who had worked an arm wrestling gimmick in the territory in 1977. His name would never by synonymous with World Heavyweight Champion. The “strap” was then passed to former *World Wide Wrestling Federation* (WWWF) Champion “Superstar” Billy Graham. Lawler took the title from Graham on 8 November, not in Memphis, but in Lexington, Kentucky. The fans never really considered the new championship as a legitimate World Title, however, Jarrett did promote a “Title versus Title” match between Bockwinkel and Lawler on 10 December, 1979. Unsurprisingly, both men left the ring still holding their respective “World” titles.
At the end of January, Lawler suffered his broken leg during a touch football game. “The King” sat on the sidelines for most of 1980. At the time of the injury, Lawler estimated that he would lose “$70,000” while out of action. On 2 June, Lawler appeared as a special ringside guest. The attendance the previous week was 3,490; the attendance with Lawler at ringside more than doubled to 7,436. He returned on 1 September to face Jimmy Hart and the attendance popped to 7,604, again almost double from the previous week when he was not on the card. The promotion featured Jimmy Valiant, Bill Dundee, Tommy Rich, and Billy Robinson during that year, with occasional appearances by Rocky Johnson and Austin Idol, but the box office receipts clearly showed that there was only one King in Memphis.
Lawler returned on a full time basis on 29 December, 1980, facing “The Dream Machine,” managed by Jimmy Hart. Lawler had been working as a heel when he was injured, but due to Jimmy Hart’s infamous “You shoot the horse!” promo after his injury, Lawler came back as a hot babyface set on revenge. The Dream Machine would also be known as Troy Graham in the promotion, but his real name was Troy Thompson, Jr. Graham, as he was

commonly known, was an outstanding interview ("shucking and jiving, moving and grooving…ballin', squalin', climbin' the wallin, old time jubilee!"). He broke into the business working for George and Gil Culkin's small Mississippi promotion. Even before he started wrestling, he would practice blading (cutting his forward with the edge of a razor) while looking in a mirror. One of the workers on the Mississippi circuit was Tom "Boogaloo" Shaft, an African-American wrestler that would often use Bo Diddley lyrics in his interviews. Graham copied Shaft's style, spitting out rhymes in a cadence not unlike a freestyle rap (although this was years before rap music was popularized). At other times, he would toss out zingers to Lawler like, "You're just like the city of Memphis, you were built on a bluff." With his dynamic personality, Graham was asked by Jimmy Valiant at one point to be his partner in the Carolinas, but "The Dream Machine" had no interest in leaving Mempho. Unfortunately, he suffered a severe ankle break in 1984 that took him out of the ring. He came back as a manager for the Interns (Don Bass and Roger Smith), but left after a pay dispute. He also returned as a main event heel in 1994, working a solid program with Lawler as someone that the fans remembered from the glory days of the promotion. Graham struggled after leaving the wrestling business and passed away in 2002.

The Memphis promotion did consistently strong business in 1981, as Hart would continuously bring in new men to face Lawler. A match with Hulk Hogan, who had worked in the territory in 1979 as "Terry Boulder," drew over 9,000 fans on 9 February, 1981. Lawler won via disqualification and would get extensive mileage of the footage with Hogan selling his punches over the next several years. A lumberjack match against Jimmy Hart on 29 June did even better, with over 10,000 in attendance hoping for "The King" to get his ultimate revenge. Lawler and Valiant drew a sellout on 3 August, facing The Dream Machine and Bugsy McGraw. Other opponents for Lawler that year included Joe LeDuc, Austin Idol, Dutch Mantell, Dory Funk, Jr., Terry Funk, and Kevin Sullivan.

The next year was an interesting year inside and outside the ring for Lawler. He worked several dates in Florida, generally in tag team situations against Terry or Dory Funk, Jr., which led to appearances in Memphis by Florida talent Kendo Nagasaki and James Dillon. Lawler also worked several dates for *Southwest Championship Wrestling*, feuding with their top babyface Bob Sweetan and receiving a title shot against Nick Bockwinkel.

Additionally, there were two exciting newcomers on the Memphis scene – one from Hollywood and one from “Uganda.”

Andy Kaufman grew up in New York and was a big fan of professional wrestling, especially the heel wrestlers. He loved the cocky, arrogant display of “The Nature Boy” Buddy Rogers and was fascinated with the concept that people would pay money to see a performer that they hated. In the 1970s, Kaufman started working on the comedy circuit, but he was much more of a performance audience than a comedian. He developed an alter ego named “Tony Clifton,” that would open his show and abuse the audience, generally getting booed off the stage. A performance by Kaufman might include singing “100 Bottles of Beer on the Wall,” counting down each verse from 100 to zero. Surprisingly enough, he did a wonderful impression of Elvis Presley. In 1978, he was cast in the hit show *Taxi*, basically portraying “The Foreign Man” character that he had used in comedy clubs and on *Saturday Night Live.* He developed a friendship with wrestling journalist Bill Apter and wanted to get involved in wrestling in New York. Apter thought that Vince McMahon, Sr. was too conservative to bring a television actor into wrestling, but he knew someone that would love the idea. Apter proposed the idea to Jerry Lawler, who was always open to a new avenue of self-promotion.

Kaufman had been wrestling women as part of his stage act and had proclaimed himself as the “Inter-Gender Wrestling Champion of the World.” It was bizarre to see Kaufman appear on the regional wrestling program, insulting hillbillies, instructing the viewers on how to properly use soap, and giving the constant reminder that “I’m from Hollywood.” Kaufman entered the area wrestling woman in unscripted matches against untrained performers. Like the carnival wrestlers from the 1940s, Kaufman knew that an untrained challenger would generally use all of their energy very quickly. Kaufman would survive the initial surge, then pin his female opponent once her energy was spent. After smugly beating a few women in the territory, Lawler challenged Kaufman in a match. On 5 April, 1982, over 8,000 fans watched Kaufman run from Lawler until Lawler allowed the *Taxi* star to put him in a headlock. Lawler worked the crowd for a few seconds, then lifted up Kaufman and dropped him with a vicious looking suplex on the back of Kaufman’s head. Lawler then hit Kaufman, who looked like a lifeless rag doll, with two pile drivers. Kaufman took the event further than planned by working an impromptu stretcher angle. After

Houston promoter Paul Boesch heard about the match, thinking that Lawler had really hurt Kaufman, he sent “The King” a telegram, thanking him for protecting the business.

On 27 July, 1982, the feud was extended by the famous appearance on *The David Letterman Show*. The original script was for the two men to end the feud by performing a duet on the show, but neither performer wanted to end the angle. Kaufman was still wearing a neck brace on the program, selling the “injury” from April. Lawler wittily noted that when Kaufman was born, “His father wanted a boy and his mother wanted a girl and they were both satisfied.” When Lettermen asked if they were just putting on a show, Lawler replied, “I couldn’t warm up to this guy if we were cremated together.” Kaufman started interrupting Lawler, saying that he could have sued him, but he wasn’t that kind of a guy. Lawler glibly responded, “What kind of a GUY are you?” To the utter shock of David Letterman, Lawler then stood up and slapped Kaufman out of his chair. After the commercial break, Kaufman tried to throw coffee on Lawler and then lit into him with a profanity filled tirade. For wrestling fans, it was spectacularly entertaining television.

Kaufman stayed away from Memphis wrestling until early 1983. On the last show of 1982, Lawler “won” the AWA World Heavyweight Title. The ref counted to three, but Bockwinkel’s legs were clearly in the ropes. The promotion announced that Lawler was the World Champion, but he didn’t have the title. On 10 January, Bockwinkel and Lawler wrestled again after it was announced that the title was “held up.” Jimmy Hart had been burned by a fireball weeks before and was out of action. During the match, “Jimmy Hart,” whose face was completely bandaged, interfered, keeping Lawler from getting the victory. After Lawler punched “Hart,” he turned around to see Jimmy Hart on the ring apron. Bockwinkel pinned Lawler during the commotion. After the match, the first “Hart” took of his bandages to reveal that it was Andy Kaufman who had just colluded with Hart to keep Lawler from getting the World Title belt. It was a wonderful angle that played out in front of over 8,200 fans.

Kaufman returned on 2 May, facing Lawler with his partner the “Colossus of Death,” which was veteran Duke Myers wearing a goofy horror mask, in a bout that drew over 9,000 fans. Andy Kaufman made several more appearances through 1983, including one extremely humorous television slap fight with Jimmy Hart, but his box office appeal in Memphis was

waning. While taping an interview during the Thanksgiving timeframe of 1983, Kaufman told Lawler that he had been diagnosed with cancer. He made his last appearance on 21 November, losing to Lawler in a boxing match. He passed away on 16 May, 1984. In 1999, a movie about the life of Andy Kaufman was released, called *Man on the Moon*. Jim Carrey portrayed Kaufman in the film and Jerry Lawler starred as himself, recreating the events that he had lived 17 years before. The fact that the feud between Lawler and Kaufman was actually a scripted wrestling angle was reported on national cable news networks. By all accounts, Kaufman loved performing in wrestling and was uniformly respectful to the performers. After Kaufman passed away, his girlfriend found all of the checks that Andy received from Jerry Jarrett while working for Memphis wrestling. He did not cash a single one.

The biggest heel drawing card that Lawler faced in 1982 was “Kimala, the Uganda Giant.” James Harris grew up in Coldwater, Mississippi and started training as a wrestler in the mid-1970s. He worked for George and Gil Culkin in 1977 and 1978 and for a time was managed by a young Percy Pringle (Bill Moody, known in the *World Wrestling Federation* as Paul Bearer, after Vince McMahon, Jr. found out that Moody was a licensed mortician). One of his early identities for Harris was “The Mississippi Mauler” and he wore striped white face paint in that persona. Harris worked in Oklahoma and Texas in 1979 as “Sugar Bear” Harris and worked in Memphis during February of 1980. He also worked in Knoxville later that year. Returning from England in 1982, he appeared in Memphis to see Troy Thompson, Jr. (Troy Graham), who he had worked with in Mississippi. Jarrett decided it was time to give Harris another opportunity in the territory.

Billed as being 6’7” and 375 pounds, Harris had the size to be a major drawing card, but he was a poor interview and did not throw a good worked punch. Jarrett started devising ways to work around those limitations. Based upon a *National Geographic* article, Jarrett developed the Kimala character (later in the 1980s, the spelling was changed to Kamala). Kimala was billed as being a former bodyguard of Idi Amin, the brutal Ugandan dictator during the 1970s. The “Ugandan Giant” was hyped not only as a jungle savage, but there was also an element of cannibalism in the character. To state that painting an African-American male in tribal designs, have him carry a spear, and hint that he was a cannibal was not the most progressive

character in the history of professional wrestling would be a remarkable understatement. James J. Dillon, one of the best managers in the business, represented Kimala, sending in taped interviews from Florida. Locally, Buddy Wayne was disguised as Kimala's "attendant" - wearing camouflage, grease paint, and a beekeeper's mask.

When something works, it works. Kimala walked into the Mid-South Coliseum looking like he had never seen civilization. He threw brutal chops that landed squarely on the head of his much smaller opponents. His eyes grew into saucers when he saw blood. The fans bought it, thinking that they were viewing a legitimate jungle savage. Debuting on 31 May, Kimala was immediately put in the main event against Lawler and pinned him on 7 June to win the Southern Heavyweight strap. During the summer, Kimala destroyed babyfaces on a weekly basis, beating King Cobra, Stan Lane, Steve Keirn, Bill Dundee, and Ron Bass. He beat Lawler again on 19 July, drawing over 8,800 fans. On 2 August, a main event with Lawler and Dundee against Kimala and James J. Dillon sold out the Coliseum, followed by a sell out the next week when Lawler beat Kimala for the Southern Heavyweight Title in a no disqualification "hair versus title" match. On 16 August, Lawler and Dundee ended the feud, beating Kimala and Kendo Nagasaki, drawing 10,411. After the feud had run its course, Kimala was teamed with Plowboy Frazier, who donned the tribal gear and was billed as "Kimala #2." (The mind boggles.) Jim Harris would continue to be a featured performer using the Kamala gimmick in all the major U.S. territories and overseas for the next decade and beyond, often appearing in Memphis when he wasn't working for a larger company.

On 14 August, Ric Flair made his only appearance on the Memphis studio wrestling program. While Flair became overexposed later in his career and both his matches and interviews became repetitive, he was a superlative touring world champion in the early 1980s, being "custom made from head to toe," wearing gold watches, and using his catch phrases, such as "to be the man, you've got to beat the man." Flair came in to do a contract signing to wrestle the Southern Heavyweight Champion at an undetermined date. After Ric did an interview, discussing how surprised he was that Memphis wasn't the small hillbilly town he thought it was, Lawler came out and asked for the opportunity to shake Flair's hand. Flair acted as though he did not know who Lawler was. After an extended give and take, with Lawler stating to Flair in a matter of fact way that it didn't matter who Flair

wrestled, since the World Champion was so much better than everyone else, Flair agreed to give Lawler a title shot on television. The two had a give and take match for “ten minutes” (actually less than that) and the time limit expired when Flair had Lawler in the figure four leg lock, his finishing maneuver. Flair demanded five more minutes with Lawler. At that point, Lawler pulled down his shoulder strap (his signal to the crowd that he would make a fiery comeback), Flair did his flip over the turnbuckle, and Lawler hit Flair with a fist drop from the second rope, his finishing maneuver. Flair then left the ring and was counted out.

Unfortunately, it was a great build up for a match that did not occur. After the angle, Flair did not return to Memphis to defend the belt. More than three years later, on 30 September, 1985, Flair did face Lawler as part of an NWA/Memphis card in the Coliseum. Flair’s title defense drew almost 9,500 fans in a contest that Lawler genuinely hated. Flair called the match and did his stock maneuvers that were featured on television each week, even calling for Lawler to toss him off of the top turnbuckle, which Lawler didn’t have the height to properly execute. When the NWA came back for a combined card on 18 November, Koko Ware got the title shot while Lawler teamed with Dusty Rhodes and Magnum TA beating Tully Blanchard, Ole Anderson, and Arn Anderson. (Ole might not have been too happy to do the job that night, as he absolutely sold nothing the babyfaces did the entire match.)

Lawler also made a few memorable appearances on *Georgia Championship Wrestling* in 1982, hyping a match with Roddy Piper. During that timeframe, Georgia television was structured around monthly cards at the Omni in Atlanta, with the event being hyped each week, much like a modern pay-per-view event. Piper had been brought into the Georgia territory as a heel announcer, but due to his off the charts charisma soon became one of the top stars in the promotion and was switched to a babyface. Lawler, working as a heel, stated that Piper reminded him of a river, since he had a small head that opened up into a big mouth. Lawler also instructed announcer Gordon Solie to save his breathe, so he could blow up his date later. Before the match occurred, Piper was fired and Tommy Rich faced Lawler on 7 November in Atlanta. The match was a no decision contest.

It was during 1982 that *The Jerry Lawler Show* debuted on WMC. The show would run into the late 1980s and was a weekly thirty minute Sunday

morning program that would both hype the Monday night matches and feature interviews with celebrities and sports figures. During football season, the program would feature Paula Lawler, Jerry's second wife, predicting the winners of the weekly National Football League games with "Paula's Picks." Lawler remained a huge Cleveland Browns fan and he would make annual visits to Cleveland to interview various coaches and players.

It was during late 1982 or early 1983 that Lawler started his plans to open his own company, partnering with Lance Russell. Lawler was the top star of the territory and felt like he was undercompensated, especially after seeing the extravagant home that Jarrett had built for himself in Hendersonville. When Jarrett heard of Lawler's plans, he made him co-owner of the company. Both men surely did better together than they would have separately. Lawler was a huge star and the fans would have followed him to another station. Jarrett was the hardnosed businessman. The fact that Lawler had an ownership stake in the company also meant that he did not leave for the WWF or the NWA when those companies expanded later in the 1980s and helped the Memphis territory survive to the mid 1990s.

In 1983, the changes in the wrestling world started to impact Memphis. Although the cards were loaded with talent, the fans were passionate, and business was consistently good, there were no reported sellouts during that year (although no attendance figure was recorded for the Lawler/Dundee "Loser Leaves Town" match on 6 June). Two things were changing – wrestling and Memphis. During the 1970s, most wrestling fans had one local wrestling show that was on for perhaps one hour or ninety minutes per week. As cable television exploded and promotions started syndicating their wrestling shows in an attempt to remain viable, a wrestling fan could watch hours of wrestling each week. In addition to the *World Wrestling Federation* and the *Georgia Championship Wrestling* shows, *World Class Championship Wrestling* from Dallas and Bill Watt's *Mid-South Wrestling* (later named *Universal Wrestling Federation*), featured top stars throughout the country, often working competitive matches. There was less need for a wrestling fan to buy a ticket to show to see a good product. Additionally, Memphis wrestling historian and performer Scott Bowden has noted that the demographics of the city started to change in the early 1980s. As middle class white families moved to the suburbs, the area of the city where the Coliseum stood seemed less desirable.

In an effort to bring more prestige to the titles, the “Southern” Heavyweight and Tag Team titles became the secondary belts as the “International” singles title and “World Tag Team” titles were introduced. Lawler began teaming with Austin Idol that year and the two singles stars were an extremely impressive tag team combination. Lawler also feuded with AWA stars Ken Patera and Jesse Ventura. Lawler kick started the feud with Patera, billed as “The World’s Strongest Man,” by delivering a pile driver to Patera that he did not sell. At the time, it was shocking, since the pile driver was always a finishing maneuver and also used at times for injury angles. (Lawler would later repeat this spot with Road Warrior Hawk). Both Patera and Ventura had great physiques and Ventura was good on interviews, but when the bell rang, their slow, methodical styles did not capture the imagination of the Memphis wrestling fans.

Speaking of the AWA, Lawler began making regular appearances in that promotion starting in December, 1982 and ending in June of 1983. In initial appearances, he received low card wins over the Indiana based wrestler Steve Regal, Tom Stone, and John Tolos. He eventually beat Ken Patera on his way to a few title shots with Bockwinkel. On 16 April, 1983, Bockwinkel beat Lawler in the main event in Chicago’s UIC Pavilion. A rematch on 21 May resulted in a “no contest” decision. Lawler finished his appearances during this run on 18 June at the Rosemont Horizon, teaming with Wahoo McDaniel and Dick the Bruiser in a win over Nick Bockwinkel, Jesse Ventura, and Blackjack Lanza. On 26 August, Lawler faced Blackjack Lanza again, as part of a tag team match in St. Louis. Lawler and David Von Erich defeated the “Blackjacks” Lanza and Mulligan. Lawler also made an appearance for *Southwest Championship Wrestling* that year, teaming with Bob Sweetan on 15 January in a loss to Adrian Adonis and Tully Blanchard. Back in Memphis, Lawler ended the year by starting his exciting program with Randy “Macho Man” Savage.

In 1984, the *World Wrestling Federation* began its aggressive national expansion and it became increasingly difficult for regional territories to attract established stars. In Memphis, James J. Dillon was back on the scene, managing the Zambuie Express. As part of the storyline, Jimmy Hart was concerned about Dillon taking the lead managerial slot in Memphis. A tag team bout with Lawler/Dillon taking on Jimmy Hart and Randy Savage drew 7,591 on 2 April. Lawler and Austin Idol made several appearances for *Georgia Championship Wrestling* taking on the Road Warriors twice in

Atlanta and once in Baltimore. Jarrett and Lawler tapped three younger workers who would have a major impact in wrestling in the 1980s for pushes in Memphis in 1984 – Rick Rude, King Kong Bundy (Chris Pallies), and Jim Neidhart. Rude had attended high school in Robbinsdale, Minnesota with future wrestlers Curt Henning, Nikita Koloff (Nelson Scott Simpson), Tom Zenk, Barry Dawsow, and John Nord. He had been in the business for a few years and had a good look, but had not been a pushed wrestler. In Memphis, he was managed by Jimmy Hart and given the lead heel slot in the territory. He also brought his sister Nancy into the territory and she worked as his valet, named "Angel." Rude worked programs with veterans Dutch Mantell and Austin Idol early in the year and was put over Lawler for the Southern Heavyweight Title in June. The two worked the main event on a loaded card on 23 July that drew almost 8,500 fans, although the matches between The Fabulous Ones against The Road Warriors and The Rock 'n' Roll Express against Randy Savage and Lanny Poffo probably sold a few tickets as well. After one match, Lawler gave a pile driver to Rude's valet "Angel." Lawler was worried about the crowd reaction of giving a pile driver to a female, but the resulting pop "blew the roof off of the Coliseum." In September, Lawler and Savage teamed to take on Rude and Bundy in tag matches, which did solid business for the company. The largest crowd of the year was slightly over 10,000 when Lawler and Idol beat The Road Warriors on 25 June.

Lawler was briefly involved in two groups that were working to stave off the WWF's domination of professional wrestling. *Pro Wrestling USA* was a group of established promoters that decided to pool their top talent to work loaded cards in opposition to McMahon. The first taping was on 18 September, 1984 (a Tuesday night) in Memphis and included Lawler and Rich working as a tag team and Lawler working a singles match. The group taped additional programs on 23 October in Spartanburg, South Carolina and on 15 November in Sumter, South Carolina. *Pro Wrestling USA* held one house show on 24 February, 1985 at the Meadowlands in East Rutherford, New Jersey, and then fell apart after each promoter decided they could fight McMahon individually better than they could collectively. Lawler also made appearances in Atlanta for Ole Anderson's *Championship Wrestling from Georgia*, which would go off the air in 1985 when Jim Crockett Promotions was given the WTBS wrestling timeslot.

For many fans, the “golden era” of Memphis wrestling ended in 1984. In 1985, the promotion would lose two of their biggest draws. After more than four years of being Lawler’s constant foil and a delightfully entertaining heel manager, Jimmy Hart left for the *World Wrestling Federation*. Later that year, Randy Savage took his head bands and flying elbows to New York as well.

Lawler worked a program with The Freebirds that year, partnering first with Austin Idol and then with Phil Hickerson to take on the guys from Badstreet. Hickerson had been in one of the best tag teams of the 1970s with Dennis Condrey and received a renewed push in Memphis during 1985. Hickerson won some points with hardcore wrestling fans after a new team called “The Freedom Fighters” entered the area. The two young men would later make huge money in the business as The Ultimate Warrior and Sting. In a promo, Hickerson noted that all the two muscle bound men knew how to do was “stick steroids in your butt.” Lawler also worked programs with Bruiser Brody and someone called “Bota the Witch Doctor” that year (which may have been Tiger Conway, Jr. or Samoan wrestler Tapu Tuufili). The promotion stopped reporting attendance on a regular basis and it became obvious from the arena videos that there were often more empty seats than fans. Dundee turned heel at the end of the year and then the unthinkable happened. On 30 December, 1985, “The King of Memphis Wrestling” lost a “Loser Leaves Town” match.

Lawler had been making occasional appearances for *Polynesian Pacific Wrestling* in Hawaii for several years. The company had been purchased by Peter Maivia in 1979, and his wife, Ofelia “Lia” Maivia took over the promotion when Peter died in 1982. On January 25, 1986, Jerry Lawler won the Polynesian Pacific Heavyweight Title from Lars Anderson. Lawler worked as a heel for the company noting, “If they were going to give the Earth an enema, they’d stick the nozzle in Honolulu.” The group did a tour of California in February of 1986, with no great results. Lawler defended his title in San Jose on 13 February drawing 1,000 fans (a $10,000 gate). Two nights later at the Olympic Auditorium in Los Angeles, the attendance was under 200. I vividly recall a tape from Stockton, California that included an in ring post match confrontation between Lawler and Jimmy Snuka. Lawler pointed at his chin repeatedly, giving Snuka the cue to punch him. It took more than a few uncomfortable seconds for Snuka to get the hint. While Lawler was gone in January and February, Bill Dundee was the

lead heel (and booking) for Memphis. Lawler returned on 3 March for his last significant box office feud with Dundee.

An exciting newcomer into the area was “The Beast from the East” Bam Bam Bigelow. Scott Bigelow was a huge man (6'3", 325 pounds) with startling agility. He grew up in Neptune, New Jersey and was a star athlete in football and wrestling, but dropped out of organized sports by his senior year. He met wrestler Chris Candido in the mid-1980s and started training at "The Monster Factory," a New Jersey wrestling school. Bigelow was trained by Larry Weil, who had worked in wrestling as Pretty Boy Larry Sharpe. Wrestling magazine journalist, photographer, and future manager Paul Heyman started hyping Bigelow in wrestling magazines and arranged for his first match at New York's Famous Studio 54 in August of 1985. (When Heyman was brought into Memphis in 1987, it was at Bigelow’s request). Bigelow came to Memphis in 1986 and the promotion effectively highlighted his combination of massive size and natural athletic ability. One of the video pieces of Bigelow that was often used was a clip showing "Bam Bam” hitting a top rope splash on a prone opponent and then immediately jumping to his knees and darting his head around, looking like an animal that needed another fresh kill. Also, in an era when tattoos were not yet part of the mainstream in American culture, having a shaved head with flame tattooed scalp made a unique visual statement.

Lawler, who both as a babyface and as a heel generally displayed relentless confidence in his abilities, got Bigelow over by stating in a reflective way that Lawler’s time at the top may be over. The two worked a short program over the Southern Heavyweight Title and also worked in tag matches, Bigelow teaming with Larry Sharpe and Lawler teaming with “The Killer,” (which was disappointingly not wrestling fan Jerry Lee Lewis, but was “The Snowman” Eddie Crawford under a mask). Bigelow would come back in 1987 and participate in some thrilling brawls in the Lawler feud with Austin Idol and Tommy Rich. Despite at times being a top pushed star in the major companies both in the States and in Japan, Scott Bigelow was destitute when he passed away in 2007.

The most shocking attendance result in 1986 was for a card on 26 September, when Tommy Rich and Jerry Lawler beat “Fire” and “Flame” in front of 9,000 fans. Fire and Flame were unmasked, revealing the perennial Memphis heel tag team of Don Bass and “Dirty Rhodes,” another

pseudonym for Roger Smith. By December, Tommy Rich had turned heel, setting the wheels in motion for the unforgettable Rich/Idol/Lawler feud. .
On 2 May, 1987, Curt Henning won the AWA World Title from Bockwinkel in Daly City, California, ending Nick's last run with the strap that he had first won in November of 1975 from Verne Gagne. Henning had debuted in 1979 as an undersized rookie, but developed his body and ring skills to the point where he was clearly one of the most talented workers in the business by the late 1980s. He made his first defense in Memphis on 11 August, 1987, getting the victory over Lawler. On 12 October, Lawler and Dundee teamed up to win the AWA World Tag Team belts from Soldat Ustinov & Doug Sommers in Memphis, showing a closer working relationship between the two companies.
In 1988, the promotion spent several weeks building toward a title match on 9 May. Lawler stated that it was time to win the belt or retire, so he put his career on the line against "Cool" Curt Henning's AWA World Championship. In a particularly tacky promotional tactic, the storyline was that the referee would be either Jackie Fargo or Curt's father, Larry "The Axe" Henning, and the determining factor would be the votes of the fans. By simply calling a premium rate phone number for a $1 fee, fans could select their choice for the ref. The promotion would later push the concept by stating that Henning was getting significant votes a telephone campaign in other parts of the country. At any rate, Lawler's idol/mentor/father figure Jackie Fargo was the referee for the bout. Almost fourteen years after first challenging Jack Brisco for a major World Title belt, approximately 8,000 ecstatic fans saw "The King" win the AWA World Heavyweight Championship. Dave Brown commenting to Jerry Wiseman, on the best match he had ever seen, "Lawler wins the World Championship after years of coming close. The place went nuts. I knew where things were going, yet I was excited to be calling that match with Lance and an electric atmosphere in the Mid-South Coliseum."
It was during this timeframe that Jerry Jarrett received an interesting phone call from Kerry Von Erich. Fritz Von Erich (Jack Adkisson) played football at Southern Methodist University (SMU) in the late 1940s and early 1950s, before hitting the professional wrestling circuit. He settled in the Dallas area in the late 1960s and became an influential member of the *National Wrestling Alliance (*NWA) Board of Directors in the 1970s. In 1975, he was voted as President of the secretive body and casted the deciding vote in

selecting Terry Funk to replace Jack Brisco as the NWA Champion at that time, instead of Harley Race. Jack Adkisson wasn't just raising a group of athletic sons in North Texas. In his mind, he was raising future NWA World Heavyweight Champions. In the early 1980s, the Dallas territory exploded with the popularity of his sons David, Kerry, and Kevin. Knowing his conservative fan base, he pushed the boys as not only great amateur athletes but also as exemplars of Christian values.

On 10 February, 1984, the family was hit with their first tragedy, when David Von Erich died during a tour of Japan. Theories about what caused the death of the 25 year old athlete include a heart attack or stroke caused by acute enteritis or a drug overdose. On 6 May of that year, Kerry Von Erich defeated Ric Flair for the NWA World Heavyweight Title at the "David Von Erich Memorial Parade of Champions" in front of over 32,000 fans in Texas Stadium. The promotion would continue to do strong business in 1985, but like all the regional territories, World Class was being impacted by the expansion of the *World Wrestling Federation*. In June of 1986, Kerry Von Erich was involved in a major motorcycle accident that kept him out of the ring for an extended period of time. He eventually had to have a foot amputated and would spend the rest of his wrestling career trying to hide that secret. Tragedy hit again in April of 1987 when Mike Von Erich, who did not have the ability to be a major star but was pushed as one, committed suicide at the age of 23. In 1987, Fritz stepped away from the company, leaving it to Kevin and Kerry. By 1988, World Class was on the verge of going out of business. Jerry Jarrett reviewed the operation and purchased the company. Jarrett, "We went to Texas and got the building back, got the television back, built the gates at the Sportatorium from zero to sell-out in about 8 weeks, paid off all the bills from the past, and enjoyed great profits in about 6 months."

Lawler worked hard as the AWA Champion. In Memphis, he defended the belt against Bill Dundee, Dutch Mantell, Austin Idol, Tommy Rich, Ronnie Garvin, Jimmy Garvin, and Tatsumi Fujinami. He appeared regularly at the AWA television tapings in Las Vegas. In Texas, he defended the belt against Terry Taylor, and King Parsons. On AWA house shows, he faced Curt Henning (one night drawing a reported crowd of 42 fans in the WWF's home base of New Haven, Connecticut; the match did better in Anaheim, drawing 200 fans), Wahoo McDaniel, and Greg Gagne. He traveled to Continental, facing Austin Idol and Eddie Gilbert, went to Georgia to face

Tommy Rich, and worked with Doug Furnas and Wendell Cooley in East Tennessee. However, his main program was against Kerry Von Erich. Kerry was billed as the World Class World Heavyweight Champion. He could still perform at a high level in the ring and had maintained a powerful physique. The two would swap the World Class belt during the fall, leading to the AWA's first and only pay-per-view event. "SuperClash III" was held on 13 December in Chicago's UIC Pavilion, headlined by the unification "title versus title" match. According to Lawler, Kerry did not want to be pinned and the finish was worked out literally seconds before the match started. After a gruesome blade job, Kerry had Lawler in his finishing claw maneuver, but the bout was stopped due to excess bleeding and Lawler was declared the winner. Lawler's belt was renamed the "Unified World Heavyweight Title."

SuperClash III was the death knell for the promotion that Verne Gagne and Wally Karbo had started in 1960. Attendance was less than 1,700 for the event and none of the wrestlers were paid. By January, the AWA announced that Lawler was stripped of his title, due to failure to make scheduled appearances. Later that year, the company would stop running events.

Lawler continued to split his time between Dallas and Memphis in 1989 and 1990. One of the major programs he had in 1989 was with a young man billed as the "Master of Pain." His real name was Mark Calaway, but he's better known to wrestling fans as "The Undertaker." Lance Russell would later comment on one of Lawler's talents that the promotion desperately needed at the time, "He knew how to work with young guys, teach them and put them over as well as anybody I have ever seen do it."

In September of 1990, Jarrett pulled out of Dallas after a financial dispute with Kevin and Kerry Von Erich. He would return for a short period of time after the Von Erichs could not successfully promote their own shows, but then also quickly left again.

While many of the established stars from the golden era of Memphis wrestling were working the circuit in 1991, attendance continued to fall. Reviving old feuds with Kamala, Eddie Gilbert, and Terry Funk did not spark significant fan interest. On 4 March, 1991, Lawler beat a young wrestler from Texas that had moved into the territory after being trained by "Gentleman" Chris Adams. Steve Austin wasn't "Stone Cold" yet. Business picked up in 1992 when Lawler and Jeff Jarrett feuded against the Moondogs, but it would never again be a strong regional territory. Lawler

and Jarrett made a conscious decision to run a “mom and pop” operation, instead of trying to directly challenge the WWF. For years, the Memphis promotion had made fun of the cartoonish version of wrestling that the WWF promoted in the 1980s. At one point, the company successfully sued Vince McMahon for promoting Harley Race simply as “The King” on a card in Nashville.

At the end of 1992, Jerry Lawler shocked the wrestling world by appearing on WWF’s *Prime Time Wrestling* program. McMahon had contacted Jarrett to help run the company while his energy was focused on a federal steroids trial. Lawler was brought in primarily to work as a heel announcer. Lawler received a unique deal in that he was not required to work exclusively for the WWF. (The transition actually started during a WWF show at the Memphis Pyramid in August of that year. Lawler and Jeff Jarrett sat at ringside for the event and the future “Double J” gave an open challenge to any WWF wrestler).

Lawler revived his Memphis program against Randy Savage, working in both the WWF and throughout the Memphis territory. During that year, Owen Hart, Bret Hart, Curt Henning, and Vince McMahon all made appearances in Memphis, with McMahon working as a heel years before he adopted the same persona in the WWF. Lawler made his Madison Square Garden debut on 21 March, 1993, defeating Tito Santana. He attacked Bret Hart on 13 June, after Bret won the “King of the Ring” tournament, stating that there was only one “King” in wrestling. To hype their match for Summer Slam, Lawler conducted an interview segment with Bret’s parents, Stu and Helen Hart. Lawler told the couple that they had “produced more tragedies than Shakespeare” and then told Helen she was so old that when she was born “the dead sea was only sick.” Helen Hart thought Lawler was hysterical. Bret Hart, who could never be accused of not taking himself too seriously, was sincerely offended. At their Summer Slam match at Auburn Hills, Michigan, Hart initially won with his Sharpshooter submission maneuver, but the decision was reversed when he refused to give up the hold. Lawler, while being taken away on a stretcher, held up his arm in victory. In 1992, Lawler won the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* “Feud of the Year” in his Memphis battles with Jeff Jarrett against the Moondogs. In 1993, he won the same award for his feud with Bret Hart. (His luck ran out in 1994, when his program with “Doink the Clown” was voted “Worst Feud of the Year.”)

In 1994, Lawler's highest profile match was a main event against Roddy Piper on June 19 at the "King of the Ring" pay per view in Baltimore. Long time fans noted that the two finally had the match that was hyped in Georgia back in 1982. While a feud with Piper in Memphis would have been phenomenal during the 1980s, the 1994 match was not well received. In Tennessee, the "Memphis Memories" nostalgia show on 7 March drew almost 8,400 fans with Lawler winning an "elimination match" in the main event. Sid Vicious, who had started his career in Memphis in 1987 working the "Lord Humongous" gimmick being managed by Paul Heyman, returned to the territory and help boost attendance. When "The Undertaker" came to town to face Vicious on a few occasions, the audiences were in the 2,500 to 3,000 range, easily doubling the normal attendance.

Lawler continued to work as a comedy heel in the WWF, much to the chagrin of his hometown fans that grew up with Lawler working as an indomitable presence. In a segment with William Shatner in January of 1985, the aging actor gave Lawler a monkey flip. (For incomprehensible reasons, Shatner would induct Lawler into the WWE Hall of Fame in 2007). Lawler resumed his feud with Bret Hart, beating him with outside interference on several occasions, before losing the infamous "Kiss My Foot" match at the 25 June, 1995 "King of the Ring" pay per view in Philadelphia. Probably not coincidentally, Lawler was no longer the main drawing card in Memphis. The biggest attendance during that year was for a series of main events featuring Tommy Rich and PG-13, a tag team comprised of "JC Ice" (Jamie Dundee, Bill's son) and "Wolfie D" (Kelly Wolfe).

Jarrett and Lawler left the Mid-South Coliseum in June of 1996 and moved the weekly program to "The Big One Expo Center," which was best known as a flea market venue. Jarrett sold his interest to the company to Lawler in early 1997 and the company was then either sold to Cleveland based businessman Mark Selker or was owned by both Selker and Larry Burton, an associate of Lawler that was orchestrating the transactions. The company closed altogether later that year and there were a series of lawsuits between Selker, Lawler, and Larry Burton, stemming from the basic claim that the assets of the company had been overstated at the time of the sale. Larry Burton was found guilty of fraud and racketeering and the legal issues stayed unresolved for almost a decade after the transactions took place.

Jerry Jarrett would later start TNA *(Total Nonstop Action)* Wrestling, but is

no longer a part of that company. Lawler would continue to participate in various Memphis wrestling promotions, such as *Power Pro Wrestling*, which was owned by former Memphis office employee Randy Hales, Terry Golden's *Memphis Championship Wrestling*, and Corey Macklin's *Memphis Wrestling*. Macklin and Lawler would have their own legal battles after Macklin took many of the wrestling tapes from the golden era of the promotion and sold them to a wrestling video distribution company.

In the WWF, Lawler received a few shots at Shawn Michael's WWF title in 1996 and also worked pay per view matches with the Ultimate Warrior and Jake Roberts. The program with Roberts was built around Jake's substance abuse issues, with Lawler joking, "What do Jake 'The Snake' Roberts and a beer bottle have in common? They're both empty from the neck up!" During that match at Summer Slam on 18 August, 1996, Lawler hit Roberts in the throat with a bottle of alcohol and then poured it down his throat after scoring the pin. It was during this time that Lawler would be wired with a microphone in the ring and would most humorously provide his own commentary throughout his matches. Lawler was selected as inaugural member of the *Wrestling Observer Newsletter* Hall of Fame during that year.

In 1997, both the dying Memphis promotion and the WWF began talent exchanges with *Extreme Championship Wrestling* (ECW). Promoter Paul Heyman had taken the most violent aspects of wrestling – blood, chair shots, dangerous bumps – and built his promotion around them. Fans were encouraged to bring weapons, such as frying pans, to ringside and they would often be used by the babyfaces as the action left the ring at the ECW arena, a venue in South Philadelphia that doubled as a bingo hall. To build up heat between Paul Heyman and Jerry Lawler, Heyman announced on a WWF show that Brian Christopher was Jerry Lawler's son, which was one of the worst kept secrets in the business. Brian Christopher Lawler had started working in the Memphis promotion in 1990 and soon gained a reputation as a good worker in the ring and an entertaining heel personality. Lawler, who had not been actively involved in raising his sons, Brian and Kevin, did not acknowledge the family relationship for a number of reasons. First, he didn't want his son to have the pressure of living up to the reputation that Lawler had built in Memphis. Secondly, if his son was successful, Lawler didn't feel that he deserved any of the credit for that success and, perhaps most importantly, "The King" did not want to be

viewed as “old.” Lawler had noted that when Jamie Dundee began wrestling, fans began to wonder how old Bill Dundee was and how much longer he was going to wrestle.

ECW had an extremely dedicated fan base, some called it a cult, that passionately hated both the WWF and *World Championship Wrestling*. Lawler started insulting ECW regularly on WWF programming, which many ECW fans took with great umbrage. Soon, he began making appearances in ECW, generally beside Sabu (Terry Brunk) and Rob Van Dam as they attacked the promotion’s top babyfaces. Lawler made few friends at the ECW Arena when he exclaimed, “This Bingo Hall should be built out of toilet paper because there’s nothing in it but shit!” In one heated melee, Lawler hit a defenseless Tommy Dreamer in the groin with a kendo stick, which resulted in an excruciatingly high pitched squealing scream. He had suffered a legitimate injury. Dreamer defeated Lawler on 17 August, 1997 at the “Hardcore Heaven 1997” pay per view, in a match that many viewed as the highlight of that event. Lawler, who during his career had been hit by a car by Eddie Gilbert and tossed down an extended set of gymnasium bleachers by Robert Fuller, knew a few things about working a “hardcore” match.

In the WWF, Lawler spent less time in the ring and more time working as an announcer with Jim Ross. The two had excellent chemistry as Ross focused on the hard sell aspects of the product, while Lawler worked both the angles and tossed out his non-stop one-liners. Lawler was so entertaining on the microphone that he was eventually changed to a babyface. In 1999, Stacy Carter, Lawler’s third wife, was introduced as a valet and performer billed as “The Kat.” Although Stacy Carter did some “wrestling,” she was basically an eye candy addition to the program and did a topless segment at the 1999 “Armageddon” pay per view. In February of 2001, Stacy Carter was fired from the WWF and Lawler left at the same time out of loyalty to his wife. This was a huge story in wrestling at the time, as people had come to love the Lawler/Jim Ross announcing team and fans were unhappy when Lawler was replaced by Paul Heyman. The company tried to get Lawler to come back, but he insisted that Stacy had to come back as well. When “The Kat” divorced “The King” later that year, Lawler returned to the WWF. Vince McMahon “fired” Paul Heyman on the air and welcomed Lawler back to a huge crowd ovation.

Back in Memphis, Lawler made an unsuccessful campaign for mayor of the city, which he would do again in 2009. While he did not receive significant support, he seemed to genuinely want the position as a way to help his floundering hometown. He continued to work independent wrestling shows both in the traditional Memphis territory area and throughout the United States. In 2004, he once again faced Ric Flair in somewhat of a "legends" match, submitting to the figure four leg lock. He was often involved in storylines involving the announcing teams or involved with skits to put over the "Divas" of the WWE, the female wrestlers and valets. The company tried to replace Jim Ross on several occasions. Jonathan Coachman, Joey Styles, and Mike Adamle all worked in the spot until Michael Cole filled it permanently. Lawler was the steady hand that provided continuity throughout the changes. In 2007, Lawler was inducted into the "WWE Hall of Fame," although he feared that having that distinction would invalidate his legitimacy as an active performer. However on 29 November, 2010, his 61st birthday, his career would begin an unlikely resurgence.

Mike Mizanin, better known as "The Miz," grew up a hardcore wrestling fan and came into the public eye being featured in MTV's reality programming. He started working on his wrestling persona while performing on MTV's *The Real World*. After taking part in the 2004 WWE *Tough Enough* television series, he received a development contract and began working in the WWE in 2006. He developed an insufferable heel persona, with a level of arrogance not unlike a young Jerry Lawler, and won the WWE Championship from Randy Orton on 22 November, 2010. While "The Miz" was ascending up the WWE ranks, announcer Michael Cole served as his personal cheerleader, ebulliently lauding Miz's accomplishments. In the opening segment of the 29 November edition of *Monday Night Raw*, a verbal confrontation between Lawler and "The Miz" led to a Tables, Ladders, and Chairs (TLC) main event that was pushed for the entire program.

The main event did not disappoint. The crowd was fully behind the veteran Lawler and it looked like he might defeat the young champion in the well structured contest. At one point, Lawler had an opening to win the match, but was thwarted by interference from Michael Cole. "The Miz" won the match after hitting Lawler in the face with the title, but the electric response from the Philadelphia crowd called for a continued story. On 10 January, 2011, Lawler was put over in the main event in Nashville, teaming with

Randy Orton against Mizanin and Alex Riley. Lawler got the victory after hitting Riley with a fist drop. On 31 January in Providence, Rhode Island, Lawler was put over again, winning an elimination match featuring six other top stars, including John Cena and Randy Orton, for another chance at the WWE Championship. The royal push continued on 7 February when Lawler teamed with Daniel Bryan to defeat Mizanin and Ted DiBiase, Jr., with Lawler pinning DiBiase for the victory.

While Lawler was getting his biggest babyface push in the WWE after almost two decades with the company, his mother, Hazel Lawler, passed away at the age of 90 on 13 February, 2011. Lawler had previously noted that Hazel did not like wrestling at all, referring to the business in a wonderfully Southern term as "that mess." When Lawler faced "The Miz" at the Elimination Chamber pay per view at Oakland on 20 February, many fans thought that given both the crowd's reaction to Lawler's push and with the passing of his mother that the company should have put the WWE Championship on "The King." However, Vince McMahon stayed with the script, having Mizanin win and continuing the storyline with Michael Cole. The next evening on Monday Night Raw, Cole asked Lawler what it felt like to let his deceased mother down. (This comment truly offending many fans, but most likely Lawler approved the line. It was consistent with the theme of Memphis wrestling, "Personal Issues Draw Money.") The family theme continued on 14 March, 2011, as Brian Christopher came back to do a segment with Michael Cole, saying that he was ashamed to use the Lawler name.

Both Lawler and Cole were playing their parts to perfection and the feud led to one of the most anticipated matches at WrestleMania 27 on 3 April in Atlanta. Lawler, who had never appeared on a WrestleMania card, had frequently mentioned that a WrestleMania slot was a career goal of his. Unfortunately, the match was not well received. As talented as Cole was on the microphone, he was not a trained wrestler. The match went too long and had an unsatisfying overturned decision after Lawler won via submission. The storyline continued for the following weeks, with Jim Ross and Jack Swagger being added to the mix. On 22 May, 2011 at the "Over the Limit" pay per view in Seattle, Lawler faced Cole in a "Kiss My Foot" contest, reprising the theme from the match Lawler had with Bret Hart in 1995. Speaking of a blast from the past, Cole started the match walking with a limp, saying that he was not medically cleared to perform, as "Handsome"

Jimmy Valiant did in the “hair versus hair” match that resulted in a riot in the Mid-South Coliseum in 1978. Lawler won the match quickly and as Cole tried to escape the stipulation, Bret Hart arrived to throw him into the ring. After Hart applied the Sharpshooter on Cole, Lawler put his foot in Cole’s mouth, effectively sealing the program with a kiss.

Jerry Lawler has entertained wrestling fans for over forty years. Even today, he has maintained a competent level of performance in the ring and, most importantly, has shown the ability to transition as the business changed. It would have been easy for him to be trapped in the glory days of his territorial success. Unlike many of the stars that came and left during his career, Lawler truly loves being a professional wrestler. He was also fortunate in that he was able to have a lucrative career without the travel demands and constant moves that were often the norm for the profession. As a babyface, heel, or announcer, he’s been one of the most talented performers in the history of the business.

About the Author

Steve Crawford is a lifelong pop culture fan, currently residing in Mansfield, Texas. His previous books are *Shake Some Action: The 318 Greatest Hits of All Time* and *Pile Drivers and Power Chords: Stories from Rector, Arkansas,…and Beyond.*